

# Child Protective Services as Gateway and Gatekeeper in the New Welfare State



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*Research demonstrates that providing material aid to families can prevent child maltreatment and involvement with the child welfare system. In this context, momentum is growing for child welfare agencies to supplement a limited safety net by providing resources themselves. Drawing on qualitative research in two case study sites, Connecticut and New York City, this article examines whether and how child welfare agencies seek to address families' material needs and how agency administrators, staff, and impacted parents understand these efforts. We find that these agencies serve as gateways to concrete support for families across a range of domains, as well as gatekeepers that determine which families receive aid. However, placing child welfare agencies—which are oriented around parental risks and empowered to separate children—in this role can undermine well-intended efforts to provide assistance.*

**Keywords:** child welfare, child protective services, material support, poverty

The US child welfare system investigates the families of more than three million children each year, disproportionately parents of Black children, Native American children, and children in low-income families, following reports of suspected child abuse or neglect (Casanueva et al. 2024; United States Department of Health and Human Services 2025). Present-day child welfare system involvement follows from his-

torical and structural racism and from economic hardships, exacerbated by public policies that increase families' economic precarity. Child welfare-involved families are typically experiencing substantial material deprivation, stemming from stagnant wages, weak labor protections, unaffordable housing, meager and diminishing cash welfare benefits, and myriad other failures of the social safety net. The ensu-

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ing hardships prompt and prolong families' system involvement (Fong 2023; Lee 2016; Reich 2005).

Recognizing material support as a promising way to prevent the substantial traumas and costs associated with maltreatment, investigations, and foster care, child welfare agencies, which have traditionally focused on parental behavior change, are beginning to view the provision of material resources as an extension of their role. Nationally, child welfare agencies and aligned think tanks and foundations have increasingly envisioned child welfare as a "well-being system" that takes on safety net functions of the depreciating welfare state, with jurisdictions across the country moving to expand efforts to secure material assistance for families (Grewal-Kök 2024). That is, even as political commitment to broadly addressing economic inequity and poverty has waned, momentum is growing to distribute material resources to a smaller subset of families—those reported for child abuse or neglect.

However, supplementing a limited safety net by providing resources through the child welfare system may stand in tension with the goal of promoting family well-being. Child welfare agencies' policing and support functions have always uneasily coexisted, with the agency relied on for the resources it provides yet feared and resented for its "pervasive regulation of [families'] lives" (Roberts 2007, 885). For parents, the child welfare system represents inherent threats to family integrity, privacy, and autonomy. Contact with the system is experienced as frightening and coercive, even traumatic. In some communities, it is also pervasive across generations. Therefore, parents needing support frequently take pains to avoid circumstances that may trigger or prolong child welfare system contact (Fong 2023). Given this tension, we must examine the implications of placing the child welfare system in the role of gateway and gatekeeper to material support.

Despite growing attention to child welfare agencies' potential role in providing material assistance, our knowledge of what agencies are doing in this area is limited, with research and commentary typically featuring individual pro-

grams in a single domain and rarely incorporating parents' experiences of these interventions. This article moves toward a more wide-ranging analysis, drawing on the perspectives of agency staff, adjacent service providers, and system-impacted parents. Specifically, we ask whether and how such agencies seek to meet families' concrete needs across a range of domains and how stakeholders understand these efforts, drawing on qualitative data from two case study sites. In Connecticut, we conducted fieldwork in two of the agency's local offices, observing child welfare investigators and interviewing investigated mothers, investigators, and adjacent professionals who filed reports. In New York City, we interviewed fifteen child welfare stakeholders, including senior administrators at the agency and its contracted providers as well as impacted parents.

In Connecticut and New York City, child welfare agencies are acting as a gateway to assistance for families, offering housing, childcare, and in-kind goods as well as advocating on individual families' behalf to procure resources from adjacent systems. While most material assistance in these jurisdictions is not primarily or uniquely available through child welfare agencies, the support offered can be substantial. Moreover, some resources are conditional on determinations of risk, placing the child welfare system in a gatekeeper role. The gatekeeper role also functions on the front lines, with child welfare caseworkers acting as arbiters of deservingness for securing discretionary supports. Even as families appreciate these supports, research participants also identified tensions inherent in placing child welfare agencies in this material support role. Agencies' authority to take children, their coercive and threatening practices, and their focus on risks posed by parents can undermine well-intended efforts to provide aid by deterring families from disclosing needs or accepting the support on offer. Amid austerity elsewhere, participants also identified risks in further positioning the child welfare agency as a go-to for other family-serving professionals seeking to get resources for families, as this may ultimately expand the reach of the child welfare system.

These findings illuminate an underexamined component of the contemporary welfare

state. Ultimately, the emerging picture complicates traditional conceptions of deservingness in relation to public assistance. Fashioning child welfare into a pathway to material support turns deservingness for aid on its head. Rather than conditioning aid on parental suitability and fitness, states tie assistance to designations of risk. Ultimately, these trends move toward inscribing child welfare as a means test. As basic needs assistance increasingly shuts out families with the least means, the state's focus on addressing need thus shifts to incorporate addressing risk, further repositioning a response to poverty and hardship to run through coercive systems. At the same time, this shift maintains a racialized approach to aid in which assistance to families of color and other marginalized families is coupled with—and in some cases conditioned on—scrutiny, stigma, and threats.

#### **WELFARE AND CHILD WELFARE: DEEPLY INTERTWINED SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT AND CONTROL**

The US welfare and child welfare systems are deeply interconnected, both in their historical development and in their current incarnations. These systems have emerged from two opposing impulses and policy arenas: first, America's history of enslavement and social control of Black, Native American, and immigrant populations, which relied on the removal of children from their families; and second, government support intended to keep children with their mothers, which was reserved largely for White families.

Family separation has long been a tool of state oppression. During slavery, family separation was routine, and threats of child removal were used to enforce obedience. Black Codes and apprenticeship laws continued state control over Black families, enabling Black parents to be found unfit and their children raised under White supervision (Roberts 2022). Indian boarding schools similarly functioned to eliminate Native American children's ties to their families, culture, land, and language. An estimated 25–35 percent of Native children were removed from their families in the years before the Indian Child Welfare Act of 1978 (Rocha Beardall and Edwards 2021). Children of immi-

grant groups now considered White were also separated from their families through “orphan trains,” which indentured them to work in farming families far from their urban communities.

On the flip side, public aid was intentionally established to protect family integrity and an emerging idea of childhood for White children. With the creation of the welfare state to safeguard (some) families came its foil: the foster care system, envisioned as a means of addressing children's welfare without providing for—and, indeed, by separating them from—their supposedly undeserving parents.

#### **A Moralized and Racialized Welfare System, with Foster Care as Its Alternative**

Until the early twentieth century, the responsibility for ensuring adequate care for children was limited to private charities and informal community efforts. Progressive-era reformers pressed the state to assume a larger role in supporting child and family well-being (Skocpol 1995). Their vision centered on family preservation, with the 1909 White House Conference on Children affirming that “the home should not be broken up for reasons of poverty” (United States Government Printing Office 1909, 10). Therefore, advocates reasoned, the state should provide parents—envisioned as deserving White mothers in particular—with resources to care for their children at home.

Aid to Dependent Children (which later became Aid to Families with Dependent Children [AFDC]) was created in 1935 under Title IV of the Social Security Act to provide federal funds for welfare assistance, aiming to boost families' economic security as a means of preventing the need for foster care placement (Rymph 2017). However, these early welfare efforts were highly restricted and moralized from the start, with benefits intended only for children in so-called suitable homes, in the authorities' eyes (Gordon 1994). In evaluating families' home environments and scrutinizing mothers' moral character, welfare caseworkers determining eligibility “were given great latitude to use their professional and personal discretion,” which facilitated discrimination based on characteristics such as race and marital status (Frame 1999, 725).

The idea that deserving parents should receive resources to rear their children at home (United States Government Printing Office 1909) raised the question of what states should do with families deemed improper and unfit for aid. As the “alternative to financial aid for those lacking sufficient parenting skills,” governmental authorities envisioned foster care (Frame 1999, 724). An affidavit presented to welfare recipients in this period, for instance, asked recipients to agree to raise children “to the best of [their] ability” and to affirm, “I understand that should I violate this agreement, the children will be taken from me” (Patterson 2000, 86).

In the three decades or so after the New Deal, it was primarily White families who were considered deserving and received government assistance. Meanwhile, families of color, especially Black families, were excluded from welfare assistance and had to contend with the punishment of foster care if they requested aid (Gordon 1994; Simmons 2023). Welfare assistance was thus racialized in ways that reserved aid primarily for families conceptualized as White while invoking family separation for families of color.

### **A Contracting Cash Welfare System and Expanding Child Welfare System**

In the early 1960s, state child protection and foster care systems expanded and federal legislation formalized the link between public assistance and foster care. For parents deemed unfit, federal AFDC benefits could be directed to state foster care agencies to fund out-of-home placement. This new funding stream for foster care, based on children’s eligibility for AFDC, framed welfare benefits and foster care placement as two parallel forms of support for poor children. Even today, federal reimbursement for foster care costs remains tied to 1996 AFDC eligibility standards.

During this time, child welfare systems explicitly turned away from any focus on families’ economic conditions. Senator Walter Mondale, who shepherded the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act to its passage in 1974, recognized that economic resources could facilitate child-rearing; however, anti-poverty programs had become politically unpopular in the years

following the War on Poverty (Raz 2020). After welfare-rights activism during the 1960s and 1970s enabled more women of color to access benefits, the welfare system had become racialized as one serving the undeserving (that is, Black) poor. In this context, politicians such as Mondale oriented the response to child abuse around individual psychotherapeutic treatment—fixing and separating individual families—rather than material support (Raz 2020). Child welfare caseloads ballooned in the years that followed, and the system increasingly intervened with families of color.

The 1996 restructuring of AFDC into the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) block grant and the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), signed a year apart, reflect the racism and rush to punishment of that time. The former ended an entitlement to economic assistance based on poverty; the latter substantially increased permanent family separations. TANF limited the assistance families could receive and amplified the disciplinary, paternalistic, supervisory, and punitive nature of the system (Gustafson 2011; Soss et al. 2011). Although ASFA maintained requirements from prior legislation that child welfare systems make reasonable efforts to prevent and remedy family separation, ASFA put its teeth behind new timelines that significantly increased the termination of parents’ rights and the creation of “legal orphans” (Raz and Edwards 2024), which early welfare proposals had explicitly sought to prevent. As Dorothy Roberts (2022, 122) has written, “The coincidence of the welfare and adoption laws marked the first time in US history that the federal government mandated that states protect children from parental neglect but failed to guarantee a minimum economic safety net for impoverished families.”

Today, child welfare agencies are increasingly on diverging paths from the cash-assistance safety net that serves the most impoverished families. Welfare cash-assistance systems are largely incentivized by law, funding structures, and public pressure to reduce assistance to families (Barnes et al. 2023; Edin and Shaefer 2016) and the proportion of poor families receiving cash assistance has dropped by two-thirds since 1996, from 68 percent to 21

percent (Azevedo-McCaffrey and Safawi 2022).<sup>1</sup> In 2023, the inflation-adjusted value of cash benefits—which were already meager—was below 1996 levels in thirty-nine states and the District of Columbia, leaving the poorest families with even fewer resources to make ends meet (Azevedo-McCaffrey and Aguas 2025). Meanwhile, the proportion of US children subject to a child welfare investigation rose by 30 percent between 1996 and 2018, from 3.6 percent to 4.8 percent (Fong 2023, 14), with one in three children—and one in two Black children—experiencing an investigation during childhood (Kim et al. 2017).

### Poverty Reduction as a Promising Child Welfare Intervention

Most child welfare investigations involve manifestations of family adversity that—while potentially detrimental to child well-being—bear little resemblance to the horrific child abuse stories that draw media attention (Fong 2023; Lee 2016). The majority are based on allegations of neglect (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2025), often related to conditions of poverty. Nationwide, 83 percent of investigated parents have household incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty line (Casanueva et al. 2024). Poverty-related challenges may make it difficult to meet children’s basic needs or may themselves be interpreted as maltreatment. Poverty can also spur child welfare cases well beyond those alleging inadequate housing, food, clothing, or other material goods. For instance, economic hardship may increase family stress—making adverse experiences such as domestic violence and substance use more likely—or reduce the resources families have to respond to stressors (Berger and Waldfogel 2011).

Though anyone can make a call, reports to state or county agencies primarily come from professionals mandated to report suspected maltreatment, such as health care, education, and law-enforcement personnel, who have lim-

ited resources to directly support families. Most cases are closed after a one- to two-month investigation, with maltreatment allegations unsubstantiated (United States Department of Health and Human Services 2025). Yet for families, investigations generate stress, amplify precarity, and undermine institutional trust (Fong 2023; Roberts 2022). Investigators with the authority to separate families conduct multiple home visits, often unannounced, ask for highly personal information about family health and habits, and request information from others involved with the family, such as doctors and teachers. The child welfare agency can continue monitoring families beyond the investigation, assessing compliance with service plans. Agencies may also pursue court supervision and foster care placement. Such experiences are especially traumatic, subjecting parents to the psychological and emotional toll of losing their children (or the substantial threat thereof) as well as to caseworkers and court officials they see as judgmental, demeaning, and antagonistic (Fong 2023; Merritt 2021; Rise 2021; Roberts 2022).

Research is increasingly clear that addressing families’ concrete needs can effectively prevent child maltreatment and child welfare system involvement, as scholars leverage exogenous public policy shifts to examine the impact of additional (or reduced) material resources. In the 1990s’ welfare reform debates, a central concern was that removing cash-assistance entitlements would increase child abuse and neglect cases, concerns ultimately borne out (Paxson and Waldfogel 2003). Reduced welfare support in the form of stricter sanctions and time limits is associated with increased child neglect reports and substantiated maltreatment reports (Ginther and Johnson-Motoyama 2022; Paxson and Waldfogel 2003; Slack et al. 2007). Meanwhile, policies providing additional material resources to families reduce child maltreatment and child welfare system intervention, including minimum

1. As cash welfare declined during this period, the Earned Income Tax Credit (EITC) and Child Tax Credit increased. However, these benefits are not directed at the poorest households (Parolin et al. 2023)—those most likely to draw child welfare system attention. Moreover, although the expansion of the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) provides a vital lifeline for poor families, it is no substitute for the flexibility of cash assistance (Edin and Shaefer 2016).

wage increases (Raissian and Bullinger 2017), child support “pass-throughs” (Cancian et al. 2013), tax credits (Berger et al. 2017; Kovski et al. 2022), cash transfers (Bullinger et al. 2023), SNAP (Bullinger et al. 2021; Johnson-Motoyama et al. 2022), paid family leave (Tanis et al. 2024), and childcare subsidies (Klika et al. 2023; Yang et al. 2019). Implementing a package of anti-poverty policies, such as a child allowance, EITC and SNAP expansions, and an increased federal minimum wage is expected to reduce child maltreatment investigations by 11–20 percent (Pac et al. 2023).

Post-welfare reform, the cash welfare system has shifted more in the direction of child welfare, emphasizing behavioral modification, supervision, and sanctions (Soss et al. 2011). Meanwhile, child welfare may be trending in the opposite direction to embrace distributing material aid. Advocacy and shifts in federal financing have incentivized child welfare systems to better comply with the federal requirement that states make reasonable efforts to prevent and remedy family separation. In 2018, the Family First Prevention Services Act created a new funding stream for child welfare systems focused on preventing family separation, muddling the activities of these two arms of the state further. As social welfare scholar Laura Frame (1999, 742, 745) suggested shortly after the welfare reform, “if the welfare system severely limits its scope of economic responsibility for poor children, child protection may be faced with expanding needs it cannot meet.” Frame further noted that “child protection’s role may shift toward further insulating children from the uncertainties of the labor market”—that is, taking on the task of addressing families’ economic precarity. We take up Frame’s prediction a quarter century later, documenting the material assistance families receive from child welfare agencies in two jurisdictions and examining how stakeholders view the implications of providing assistance through these agencies.

## DATA AND METHODS

We draw on data from two qualitative case studies, one in Connecticut and one in New York City. Each study was approved by both university and agency review boards. Rather than

comparing the two cases, we aim to understand material support provision and stakeholder perspectives on it in these two sites. These agencies—the Connecticut Department of Children and Families (DCF) and the New York City Administration for Children’s Services (ACS)—are held up as examples of agencies that have developed practices responsive to families’ needs (Annie E. Casey Foundation 2015; Casey Family Programs 2020, 2022).

In Connecticut, we analyze data from an ethnographic and interview study of child maltreatment investigations in two DCF area offices (New Haven and a set of small towns in the northeast region of the state). In 2018, the first author spent approximately six months observing investigative casework, including home visits, along with other staff meetings and training sessions. For thirty-seven investigation cases, the researcher also discussed these cases with the assigned DCF investigators, interviewed most of the mothers under investigation, and interviewed many of the professionals who reported these cases, as well as other local professionals mandated to report suspected maltreatment. These interviews, conducted in person with over one hundred participants, focused on participants’ perspectives on the situation drawing the agency’s attention as well as their experiences with the agency on the case, whether as a reporter of suspected maltreatment, an investigator, or a mother subject to investigation. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Observations were documented in real time, then fleshed out into more extended field notes shortly thereafter. For more information on this data collection, see Fong 2023.

The Connecticut data collection did not specifically focus on material assistance, and interview questions did not raise the topic, although the researcher probed on it as it emerged in observations. Although most interviews and observations emphasized DCF’s behavioral rather than material interventions (Fong 2023), the researcher observed instances of DCF offering material assistance that drew her interest. National conversations and initiatives urging child welfare agencies to embrace material support led us to the present research questions. We decided to revisit the Connecti-

cut data and collect new data in New York City, which has long been at the forefront of services to prevent foster care placement while more recently expanding its provision of concrete resources.

In New York City, we conducted interviews with key informants, including senior ACS administrators, administrators and staff at private providers that contract with the city to provide child welfare services, parent advocates, and system-impacted mothers. Interviewing administrators in New York City allowed us to learn about the agency's material supports from a different perspective than the frontline work we observed in Connecticut. As such, we see the two datasets as complementary rather than parallel. We interviewed six ACS administrators at the deputy commissioner level who oversee divisions related to the issue of material support provision. These administrators were identified in collaboration with ACS leadership. We interviewed three senior administrators at private provider agencies, drawing on our knowledge of New York City organizations working in this space to select participants. We interviewed six system-impacted mothers, including two currently employed as parent advocates at legal defense organizations. The other four, at least two of whom were in foster care as children as well, were parents with recent cases who were recruited from organizations supporting parent and youth advocacy in New York City. Altogether, between December 2023 and February 2024, we conducted thirteen virtual interviews with fifteen participants (in two instances, two interviewees participated jointly). These interviews, which lasted from thirty minutes to over an hour, focused specifically on the material support offered in child welfare cases as well as the opportunities and challenges participants saw with this assistance, enabling us to delve more deeply into the topic and build on the more inductive findings from the Connecticut study.

We reviewed interview transcripts and field notes to identify emerging themes. For the Connecticut data, where data collection focused on perspectives on and experiences with child welfare investigations more broadly, initial coding for the larger project included a

code for "services and referrals," which included both material and nonmaterial supports. We reviewed the Connecticut data to identify material relevant to the research focus, in an abbreviated index-coding approach (Deterding and Waters 2018). Across both study sites, we then organized the interview and field-note segments topically, beginning with broad topics such as agencies' practices with respect to material support, justifications and perceived benefits of this assistance, concerns and perceived challenges of this assistance, and stakeholders' visions of the role of child welfare in material assistance. We reviewed data excerpts within these codes, organized by type of participant (for example, child welfare administrator, parent), and then applied more specific analytic codes (for example, "families appreciate assistance," material assistance "obscures need for broader change"), adding new codes as appropriate. We used this coding and our ongoing reading of the data as the basis for our analysis and writing.

Both jurisdictions studied are in politically progressive areas, where public assistance, nonprofit support, and social services are relatively robust compared with the US overall. The maximum TANF benefit level for a single-parent family of three in 2022 was \$771 monthly in Connecticut and \$789 in New York—above the median US state, at \$492 (Thompson et al. 2023). However, this remains well below the federal poverty level; moreover, the cost of living in both areas is high, and benefit levels have not kept pace (Azevedo-McCaffrey and Aguas 2025). Although our findings may not necessarily apply to areas with even less support for families, the push for child welfare agencies to provide material supports is emerging around the country. Agencies in jurisdictions such as Kentucky, Indiana, and Wisconsin are working to respond to system-involved families' material needs (Grewal-Kök 2024), and child welfare leaders in a national survey indicated that child welfare agencies, along with public benefit systems, have a responsibility to "screen, refer, and help families receive" economic and concrete supports during child welfare investigations (Heaton et al. 2023, viii).

## RESPONSES TO FAMILIES' MATERIAL NEEDS

In the ethnographic work in Connecticut and interviews in New York City, child welfare staff as well as parents, attorneys, and service providers acknowledged poverty as a significant contributor to child welfare system involvement. “There’s general consensus that poverty is a driving factor for people’s involvement in child welfare,” said an ACS administrator. An administrator at an ACS-contracted service provider echoed, “Many of the issues that link and bring children in contact with ACS are due to poverty issues.” In Connecticut, DCF staff likewise recognized poverty at the root of many situations drawing DCF’s attention. Even as they largely focused on individual parents’ actions and sought to remedy family challenges through behavioral approaches (Fong 2023; Lee 2016; Reich 2005), those working within the system sometimes referenced research linking families’ material needs to system involvement or acknowledged the poverty-driven situations they observed in their daily work.

Parents, too, emphasized their material needs in relation to their child welfare cases, even as they understood that inadequacy in providing for their children could be viewed as parental unfitness, potentially heightening and extending their system involvement. In Connecticut, for instance, an investigator visited a mother at a relative’s home. The investigator opened by asking the mother what was going on. The mother’s words came out all in a rush: “Right now, I don’t live here, I don’t have a place to stay, I’m homeless, and I just lost my job like two weeks ago, so I’m doing my own struggle.” The investigator asked the mother what she thought she needed. Day to day, she did not know where she would sleep each night. She had been unable to obtain help with housing from any public or nonprofit agency. Through tears, the mother said, “a place to stay, my own place.”

Child welfare agencies are thus receiving families in need of assistance, seeing a weak and inconsistent social safety net that often fails to meet material needs, and recognizing that these needs may threaten child and family well-being. Unlike safety net systems, which

have no obligation to ensure that all those eligible for assistance exit poverty, child welfare agencies are required by federal law to make “reasonable efforts” to prevent and address family separation. Some jurisdictions have interpreted that mandate to mean that child welfare agencies should assist with material needs, often a factor precipitating removal or a barrier to reunification from foster care. In Connecticut and New York City, as these agencies created special programs and priority status for these families, they began to carve out a space for child welfare in resource provision, with agency oversight functioning as a means of narrowing resource provision within a wider pool of needy families. Thus, securing substantial material assistance from the child welfare system has typically required being deeply involved with the system, such as through foster care, court supervision, or ongoing monitoring through the child welfare agency or contracted preventive services providers.

In response to inadequate support from other systems and policy frameworks directing agencies to prevent family separation, both child welfare agencies also provide assistance to families under investigation, even when investigations are closed without any finding of maltreatment. In Connecticut, for instance, investigators are trained to get information about families’ financial situations, including public-benefits receipt, on every case and “see if there’s anything we can do to help with that,” in the words of a DCF trainer. In New York City, assistance during investigations has been atypical but has grown in recent years amid increasing recognition that material support can prevent repeated maltreatment and child welfare involvement.

ACS and DCF directly provide many types of goods to families on their caseloads, including food, clothing, beds and bedding, baby supplies, transportation passes, and school supplies, increasingly acting as a gateway to material support. Child welfare also functions as a gatekeeper, earmarking some resources—including certain housing supports and childcare priorities—for families with ongoing child welfare cases or who consent to child welfare-provided services, a tethering that reframes

eligibility for resources around family risks rather than needs. Ancillary resources and advocacy to access supports through other systems are provided at the discretion of a caseworker, another gatekeeping function.

Although we do not have a comparable estimate in Connecticut, in New York City an ACS administrator estimated that “a very large percent of families,” over half, receive some kind of material assistance through ACS. Provision of these resources has grown significantly in New York City in recent years, and the agency has hired a senior staff member and consultant specifically to develop pathways for addressing material needs, whether through enhanced supports to access public benefits through its sister agencies or increased programming through ACS itself.

Importantly, agencies such as ACS and DCF are not by any means scaffolding families with a robust social safety net. In Connecticut, an investigator said, “We could give you some food, we could give you some clothes, we can even pay for a security deposit.” But, she indicated, DCF could not meet families’ material needs on an ongoing basis. ACS staff noted that resources available through special access or priority for families with child welfare cases represent only a small slice of economic assistance for New York City families, and there are multiple doors to access in-kind goods, such as through the hospital system or cash-assistance agency. The child welfare gateway is not necessarily an obstacle-free path, either. Even as we highlight the resources flowing through these agencies, families’ needs dwarf available resources, and parents and some service providers emphasized the challenges they face in trying to obtain assistance, even through ACS and DCF. Moreover, few needs are systematically screened for. Rather than offering resources to every family who qualifies, the support that agencies provide is more often discretionary. Nevertheless, the child welfare agencies we studied are actively seeking to procure—or help families to procure—assistance, both formally and informally, that can be difficult or, in some cases, even impossible to secure otherwise. In an environment of limited overall resources, this places child welfare agencies in the dual role of gateway and gatekeeper.

### **In-Kind Goods**

Child welfare agencies in both jurisdictions provide limited in-kind assistance to families at any stage of system involvement. In New York City, some providers of preventive services, rooted in the settlement house tradition, had long focused on connecting families to the safety net and addressing material needs. More recently, ACS has sought to standardize and expand those efforts, training all contracted preventive-services providers to connect families to support for concrete needs and expanding an emergency services budget line for in-kind goods. At an ACS-contracted provider, an administrator described the many things her agency provides families, bolstered by significant private philanthropic support: “We honestly assist with furniture, beds, cribs, playpens. We assist with dressers, dinette set[s], a sofa, bedding. There’s families that will approach us and ask for assistance with infant formula, milk, food, clothing, assistance with paying their light bill, assistance with paying their gas bill, to purchase an AC, an air conditioning unit, to install in the window. . . . During the pandemic, there were families that were calling us for assistance with Pampers, wipes, infant formula. Our purchasing team, we would order from Amazon and have it deliver a month’s worth of items for them.” ACS itself specifically encourages these practices. As one administrator explained, “We have an expectation that all of our contracted agencies are going to meet the concrete needs of the families that they’re working [with].” Likewise, contracted foster care providers can provide ancillary items to parents, such as carfare, and reunifying families are eligible for more significant resources, such as a furniture grant.

More recently, families under investigation—even in cases that will close without further services—may receive in-kind goods from ACS. For families with newborns, an administrator said, “We’ll provide them pack and plays. . . . We would provide them with a baby bag filled with just necessities to start out as a mom.” When families have material needs, such as for a washing machine, children’s school uniforms, or furniture, the agency now aims to address those needs. In several boroughs, ACS has partnered with the city food

bank to outfit ACS-specific food pantries “with really good food, steak, chicken, all the meats you could think of, shrimps . . . canned goods and dry goods,” in the words of this same administrator. Although this resource is not strictly limited to ACS clients (and food pantries abound in New York City), it functions to make a burdensome aspect of poverty management easier for child welfare-involved families.

In Connecticut, when staff noticed families’ hardship but could not cover these material needs through structured supports, they often tried to meet these needs. Office-wide emails scouting around for all sorts of items for families proliferated; caseworkers asked their colleagues if they had any strollers, baby clothes, bedding, and so on that they could donate to a family in need. In one case observed, after the mother shared that her son did not have enough clothing, the investigator responded accordingly: “I did get some donations and helped her with some of his clothing. I did notice that she didn’t have a sheet and mattress pad and a blanket. I happened to have a donation of some new stuff for his bedroom.” Investigators offered bus passes, issued furniture or clothing vouchers, and procured Christmas gifts and school supplies. An investigator explained that if a newborn’s family were reported to DCF and the family did not have baby supplies, “We would purchase the necessary things,” such as diapers, a bassinet or crib, and a car seat. She said that this would be the agency’s responsibility: “DCF would have to help.”

### Housing

Housing is a major need for child welfare-involved families. In Connecticut, although DCF staff emphasized that they did not have any ins with the housing authority to provide long-term support, DCF has offered a supportive housing program since the late 1990s, currently serving approximately five hundred families. To participate, families must be reunifying from foster care or have DCF cases open for ongoing oversight. This program “provides housing services and intensive case management to DCF families where lack of appropriate housing present[s] a barrier to reunification,” according to the agency (Connecticut Department of Children and Families 2024). For up to

two years, participating families receive housing subsidies as well as referrals to and coordination of services such as those for substance use, mental health, and parenting.

At the investigation stage, DCF could pay for emergency shelter (such as hotels) on occasion, for families who had move-in dates or shelter interviews upcoming. For example, in an investigation launched because of the family’s homelessness, the mother had secured an apartment but could not move in right away. The investigator recognized that if the mother paid for a hotel until her move-in date, she would not have the funds for the apartment, so he requested DCF funding for a hotel to bridge the gap. The agency could also cover security deposits and other one-time costs for families whose income could sustain the rent. “I’ve tons of money,” remarked another investigator, saying that for families with an affordable housing option identified, “I’ve paid up to the first month’s, two months dedicated for my clients. . . . We do have some funds that we can tap into all the time.”

In New York City, reunification from foster care gives a family priority with the city’s public housing agency (NYCHA 2026). This priority is shared by other groups, often overlapping with these families, such as homeless families with children; moreover, administrative challenges and caseworker discretion or lack of knowledge can still block access. Nevertheless, the priority confers a significant advantage when activated. One parent described the yearslong waiting game after applying for public housing. Then, once she had an ACS case requiring stable housing before reunification, her application was “pushed,” she said. Her ACS caseworker made some calls: “I viewed [the apartment] within the next week. . . . I got my keys the same day. . . . If it wasn’t for them [ACS], I feel like I would still be waiting on the waiting list to get into housing.” In addition, ACS tries to gather vouchers—though typically just a dozen each year, well below the number needed—from the federal Housing Choice Voucher program and designate these vouchers for their clients, both youth aging out and families seeking to reunify.

ACS also operates a new rental subsidy program for families receiving preventive services. In New York City, preventive-services agencies

offer case management and clinically focused, evidence-based programs. Regulations stipulate that these services are for families at risk of foster care placement. Although preventive services are technically voluntary, 80 percent of families enroll following an investigation, and monthly office and in-home visits by caseworkers are required (Casey Family Programs 2020). The preventive rental subsidy can be paid monthly for up to three years or provided as a lump sum of up to several thousand dollars to cover rental arrears or moving costs. As an ACS administrator explained, “As long as they’re receiving services from ACS, they are eligible to apply. We will apply for them to get the housing subsidy for them to cover their rent. . . . As long as you have an ACS active open case, and preventive services, if you apply, you will get it.” However, it had been underutilized at the time of interviews (the grant amount had been \$300 per month until recently). The agency was also just launching a pilot project to obtain one hundred city-funded housing vouchers (of over fifty thousand of these vouchers citywide), paying at or near market rate, to keep families in preventive services from entering homeless shelters. Administrators explained that they pursued this initiative because they recognized that “stable, affordable housing is critical,” with “huge implications on child welfare.”

### **Childcare**

ACS provides a subset of city childcare vouchers earmarked for families under investigation or otherwise involved with ACS. Even during periods when New York City had long waiting lists for childcare vouchers, families could access these vouchers, according to ACS administrators. “It is a very quick process to get a family that is child welfare-involved connected to childcare assistance,” one said. Even for families involved with ACS via an investigation only, this administrator continued, “there is a very clear and smooth referral pathway to get a childcare voucher.” Notably, however, maintaining that voucher requires remaining under ACS monitoring.

In New Haven, Connecticut, DCF also had a partnership with the local Head Start provider. Even in cases that DCF would ultimately close

after investigating, investigators offered to make childcare referrals and indicated to parents that their applications would receive priority. As one investigator put it to a parent, even if children were not removed, the childcare application would look like “one of our [DCF] kids” because of the referral coming from DCF. “It’ll get me in the door,” the mother suggested. “Exactly,” the investigator replied. In another case, a housing case manager had tried to get a family into Head Start the prior year, only to be wait-listed. However, once DCF became involved, the investigator told the mother he had a “separate in” with the childcare provider: “We have our own list.”

### **Advocacy**

Child welfare-involved families may also benefit from the agency or its contracted providers advocating on their behalf to other public agencies. An administrator at one New York City preventive and foster care provider explained that they “advocate a lot” for families on their caseload and that this facilitates resource provision: “The advocacy, just us calling and talking to someone that maybe we’ve developed a relationship [with], absolutely would help the process.” In another example, during the study period, New York City was housing newly arriving migrant families at hotels. Recently, an administrator at a private provider said that families were receiving notice that they had to leave the hotel in sixty days. For families with ACS preventive services cases, “we were able to draft them a letter indicating they’re preventive families. Their children are attending school in Manhattan, and just creating a scenario for them of like, ‘It would be really helpful if they could be able to stay in Manhattan, so their children are close to their school and they’re not traveling on a train from Brooklyn or the Bronx to get to Manhattan.’” This kind of advocacy, the provider explained, is limited to families receiving ACS-contracted services and would not be available to other families that walked in requesting quick assistance or support.

Likewise, a case in Connecticut involved a homeless mother in New Haven trying to get a scarce spot in a shelter. Calling 2-1-1 had been fruitless. The DCF investigator sat with the

mother into the evening to continue calling shelters and 2-1-1. DCF ended up arranging funds for a hotel. Then, the following week, the investigator reported that the family's shelter assessment intake had been moved up. The investigator accompanied the mother to the meeting to convey the urgency of the situation. They were told that the next shelter opening would not be available for another three weeks. The investigator emphasized that DCF would not be able to fund a hotel for that long. Later, the investigator told the researcher that this seemed to move the intake staffer, who said she could get on the phone to see what might be possible. This mother had called DCF herself to report her homelessness, which ended up giving her access to advocacy that, in turn, increased the likelihood she could access limited shelter resources.

DCF also facilitates access to material resources by referring families in cases designated as lower risk at intake to another community agency. This partner agency provides case management and has some funds available to cover things such as security deposits, furniture, and summer camps. Investigators framed the program to families as an opportunity to get help with whatever they needed. This referral is exclusive to DCF, meaning that only DCF-involved families (specifically, those with cases on the lower-risk track) can access this program.

### **Individual and Inconsistent Responses to Poverty**

Even as ACS and DCF provided meaningful and often much-appreciated assistance, they are not equipped to provide sustained support at any large scale. Moreover, much of the support that these agencies provide is not necessarily distributed systematically—that is, there are no clear criteria identifying families eligible for a particular kind of assistance. In addition, it can be ad hoc. The fact that aid is discretionary and sometimes random creates an opening for perceptions of deservingness to affect resource distribution. “I can’t say we have a really rigorous methodology at all” for distributing aid, reflected an administrator at a New York City private provider. Further, the privatized nature of New York City’s child welfare system means

there are substantial differences between providers. Caseworker familiarity with an informal and complex bureaucracy also determines resource access options, as does the willingness of a caseworker to take extra steps for a parent, often tied to informal assessments of deservingness. In Connecticut, we saw DCF staff make concerted efforts to pay for some families’ hotel stays, such as in the New Haven case described earlier, while ignoring others. “What we usually do, we will help [with a hotel] any client who doesn’t really have a history of transiency,” an investigator said. Another investigator requested a \$200 furniture gift card for a family lacking beds for their children: “I don’t like to use it a lot, but I think they have, obviously, some strengths. . . . They’re doing a lot of things right,” she said.

New York City parents we interviewed remarked that when it came to material assistance, it felt like ACS and provider agencies went on a case-by-case basis or exhibited favoritism. Caseworkers can use their own judgment and discretion to weigh whether a particular family really needs or would benefit from support. Indeed, funding that private providers earmarked for in-kind goods for families was referred to as discretionary funding in New York City and flex funding in Connecticut.

As child welfare agencies cannot fill the gap between market conditions and available safety net assistance, some parents expressed frustration about the lack of assistance they received to address their material needs. For example, although the mother referenced earlier had her housing application accelerated by ACS, another New York City mother shared, “As far as, like, them helping me with, like, finding an apartment and stuff like that, they have not helped me with that.” Parents were clear about the family instability that could result when material support is not offered. This mother and her teenaged son had reunified to a shelter and she had been repeatedly denied public benefits, even though being home for her son had forced her to quit a job with late hours. The agency had provided two gift cards but no help with her public benefits case at a time when the benefits agency made headlines for its long waitlist. “I need some backup,” this mother said. “I would have expected somebody to go

with me, or like, give me a letter or something.” She felt triggered by being in the shelter and concerned about maintaining her calm with her son and sobriety under stress. “That just brings me back all the memories from when my kids got taken away, you understand? Because I was in a shelter at that time. So that’s not good, like for my mental [state]. Every day, I gotta come in [by curfew], I gotta sign in. Same stuff that I was doing ten years ago.” She added, “Some days I do break down and cry, you understand? Because it’s a reminder of everything.” Absent support with basic needs, families managing significant transitions could feel quite precarious.

When child welfare agencies take on material support work, they can determine for themselves which families to assist and to what extent. Because material assistance is not their primary activity, there is little accountability for inequitable treatment or leverage, aside from legal representation, for parents to ensure their needs are met. This positions frontline staff as gatekeepers determining who receives resources.

#### **COMPLICATIONS AND UNINTENDED CONSEQUENCES OF MATERIAL SUPPORT PROVISION THROUGH CHILD WELFARE**

The material assistance that ACS and DCF provide meets important needs for families, and families appreciated the assistance they receive through the child welfare agency. The mother in New York City whose public housing application ACS accelerated said she was “very happy that they were able to push it, because there’s nothing like just having your own.” ACS had provided her with furniture as well, for which she felt “extremely grateful.” A mother in Connecticut recalled a friend whom DCF had helped with school clothes, beds, and other necessities. “That can make people feel human and cared for,” she said. At the same time, system officials, frontline workers, and system-impacted parents alike identify concerns, challenges, and unintended consequences that come with child welfare agencies fashioning themselves as material resource providers.

#### **Support Tethered to Accusations of Maltreatment**

First, distributing concrete support through child welfare agencies means that a pathway to assistance runs through a child maltreatment report. Because child welfare agencies are taking on this role, other state systems may fail to ensure that all families in need can navigate and access assistance. Families with material needs may find it difficult to access assistance until after things escalate into crisis situations—a setup that belies broadly espoused goals of preventing child maltreatment.

For example, a case in the Connecticut study came in shortly after a family’s investigation closed. The mother had left the home, so the father returned to the DCF office seeking help getting food assistance benefits in his name to provide food for his children. “Since the case was closed, we couldn’t offer anyone assistance,” an investigator explained, adding that a supervisor advised the father, “If there really is an issue, then call the [child maltreatment hotline] and make a report.” Only after he did was he able to get from DCF the documentation he needed to show the public benefits office that the children were living with him. Getting help involved alleging maltreatment by his children’s mother and opening his family up for investigation.

An administrator at a New York City private provider echoed, “Someone has to allege that you abuse your child, that you’re having a hard time, in order to receive support.” She shared her perspective that the system is not set up to truly prevent families from falling into crisis—it is only afterward that assistance available through ACS is activated. For families “doing right by their children” but “having a hard time,” she advised, “do not allow them to continue to suffer to the point where they’re abusing their children. That’s when you’re going to step in.” Under the present system, she added, “you have to, lack of a better word, commit a crime before you get a receive out.”

Likewise, an investigator in Connecticut lamented that she could do little to help a family access housing because the mother was not abusive or neglectful, saying, “this case does

not make it” for supportive housing, given the program’s requirements that the DCF case be ongoing. For this family, the investigator said, “You almost wish there was some level of mental health that would make her neglectful, where you could transfer the case [to ongoing DCF oversight] and know they’re going to connect her with services. Not that we want her to be neglectful, but that’s the only way that we can transfer and help.” Essentially, they needed to wait until conditions deteriorated—and the mother could be labeled neglectful—before any housing assistance could be provided. A randomized controlled trial found that Connecticut’s supportive-housing program increased family reunification rates, decreased family-separation rates, and decreased substantiated maltreatment report rates (Farrell et al. 2018). However, this program could not be offered to families unless or until they met the threshold of child maltreatment risk necessary for an open DCF case.

Even parents who appreciated the material support facilitated by their individual ACS cases recognized how this arrangement could cut off those without ACS involvement from needed assistance. The New York City mother whose housing application ACS pushed acknowledged that without ACS, she would still be in a shelter suffering. Families without ACS cases, she noted, are “waiting years.” If a family became homeless but did not have an ACS case, she wondered, “What assistance would you get?” Given her experience, she concluded, “They have to do an investigation first before you get the necessary assistance that you need.”

### **Families’ Needs Interpreted as Risks, Inviting Further Monitoring or Separation**

Child welfare agency administrators and staff recognized poverty and material hardship as drivers of child maltreatment, and thus viewed providing material assistance as a way for agencies to prevent maltreatment. An ACS administrator described the “coaching that happens with the frontline staff” to help them understand how not meeting families’ basic needs can become a “safety or risk” situation. “When a family is in need of certain things, and they don’t get it, that’s a risky situation,” said an-

other ACS administrator. A DCF trainer told trainees it was “kind of a no-brainer” that, “if I’m struggling to meet basic needs, stressors in my life are going to be different.” She added that “concrete stressors can take a toll on a parent” and “lead to secondary issues.”

Given this perception, parents accessing material assistance through child welfare agencies must disclose needs—or even requests—that can be perceived as risks by an agency focused on child abuse and neglect and that can open parents up to additional questioning and monitoring. A parent advocate described what she had observed: “If I ask for diapers or I ask for wipes, there’s going to be questioning about, well, how do you usually get it? And what happens when we leave? How will you get it? Are you going to be able to provide the minimum degree of care for this child? What are you doing with the money that you are getting from public assistance? How are you managing that?” This advocate recalled requesting discretionary funding so that a client who had just reunified with her child could purchase hot food. In response, she received a “long email back saying, ‘Well, if she can’t plan for this, if she can’t figure it out, then maybe the court should have thought about it, should reconsider the decision to have returned the child back to her.’” The advocate said that such reactions could escalate to the point where the agency might ultimately find reasons to request child removal. She summed up this approach as paternalistic, adding that it was “dangerous for our clients sometimes to continuously ask for things” even during transitions understood to be difficult.

Parents recognize and weigh these trade-offs. A mother with an ACS case who was not receiving sufficient public assistance to meet her family’s needs said, “I know they have resources around that, but they also, you know, penalize you if you don’t have enough food and things of that nature.” Another New York City mother recognized the childcare and housing assistance ACS could potentially provide, but wondered, “What if you got another case? Will they remove everything from you? What if you’re not responding to them after they gave you the necessary things that you needed for

your household? Where would you be at this point?”

In another case, a Connecticut mother appreciated her investigator giving her clothes and bedsheets for her children. Yet, she added, “I tend not to ask for much [from DCF] unless it’s a necessity.” For instance, she did not ask for a bed for her nine-year-old son even though his bed frame was broken and even though, as noted earlier, DCF can sometimes provide such furniture. The mother said, “A lot of people tell me, ‘Oh, get beds, get this.’ I don’t want them in my life forever, so I’m not gonna be like, ‘Well, I need this, this, this, and this.’” She explained, “If you sit there and ask for a lot of things, then they feel like, ‘Oh, well, she needs us, so let’s try to keep it open longer.’” As these parents articulate, sharing one’s need for assistance with the child welfare agency amplifies the perception that one’s family is at risk of maltreatment and thus invites the possibility of ongoing monitoring and even coercive intervention—a possibility parents may be understandably unwilling to take on.

### **Assistance Tied to a Policing Agency Can Inhibit Take-Up**

Providing assistance through child welfare agencies ties support to intervention by an agency empowered to separate families. Interviewees shared how child welfare agencies’ surveillance and child removal practices make parents apprehensive about requesting and receiving assistance through these same agencies, deterring families from accessing available resources. Child welfare administrators and staff in both jurisdictions acknowledged their agencies’ negative reputation in impacted communities, as well as parents’ fears of engaging with child welfare authorities. Staff conveyed a recognition that they had to work to build trust with impacted communities.

In interviews with system-impacted parents, some described how they came to see helpful aspects of the child welfare agency’s intervention. Nevertheless, they expressed ambivalence, recognizing the benefits and costs of this intervention. As a mother in Connecticut reflected, “They did plug me into some good resources. Some of that stuff did actually come out of it, other than it racking my brain the

whole time, the forty-five days [of the investigation].” She appreciated a DCF-contracted agency finding and funding her son’s summer camp. After her investigation, she said that she learned that “they’re not all bad.” At the same time, she emphasized that the investigation had fostered intense anxiety, as she didn’t know what could or would happen. Even after her case closed, the agency had a certain association: “DCF, oh God, stop, stop, stop, red light, red light, red light.” Similarly, a mother in New York City remarked that with an ACS case, “You’re really under surveillance for [sixty] days. Listen, no matter what, in that [sixty] days, anything can happen and your world is just turned upside down. Nobody wants to go through these situations in order to get the help that they need.”

Earmarking some material assistance for child welfare clients keeps some families from getting needed support. At an ACS-contracted private provider, an administrator said, some families were not willing to sign up for the provider’s services, owing to “the fear . . . of signing up for preventive services and having ACS become involved in your life.” This administrator’s colleague added that people “see prevention as part of ACS. Even when they are really suffering and going through hard times, they may not approach us. . . . They do not want any business, any connection, any linkages to ACS.”

In interviews, parents said they were wary about turning to the child welfare agency for help. One mother had heard that ACS offered childcare subsidies, including some vouchers not tied in any way to child welfare involvement. Yet, given the harm she had seen ACS inflict on families, this mother continued, she didn’t think she could trust them. “I don’t know if I would accept an ACS [childcare] voucher, because there’s so many things that come with ACS.” She said that she would struggle with that decision. On the one hand, she would need childcare to work, but on the other hand, “if I take this voucher, would it just be childcare? Or would it be them coming into my life and want to just surveil who I am and who I am as a parent?” Likewise, another parent said she would not feel comfortable going to ACS for help with childcare, housing, or other material needs given ACS’s focus on parental

wrongdoing. She felt that asking for help from ACS would portray her as an “unfit parent”; her experience made her wary that the agency would “con” parents and “then they’ll have a worker at the door.”

A mother in Connecticut, too, grappled with whether to accept assistance through DCF. Her DCF investigator had hoped to refer the family to a partner agency for additional support, given the family’s material needs. The family was living doubled-up with another family. “None of them work. They don’t have state assistance. . . . [The mother] has four kids, her girlfriend, and her girlfriend’s son—they’re all in one room, one bedroom,” the investigator summarized. “I would think that hearing that there’s a program that could help you get your own place and space. . . . I didn’t get their reaction about the [partner agency] and what they could help with that I expected, I guess. Because I thought if anybody could use [partner agency] services, this was a family that could.” In a separate interview, the mother expressed that the partner agency’s services had indeed piqued her interest. She wanted “to see if [the partner agency] could help me put a roof over my children’s heads,” which she needed. At the same time, she planned to wait to make up her mind about the program. She said, “At the moment, I thought they were using that to keep an eye on me. That’s why I was so insecure yesterday. I thought, ‘If they want me to do this program to keep an eye on me, I am going to feel pestered.’” The program’s connection to DCF, a surveilling agency, made her hesitant to sign up. In the end, she declined the referral.

### **Availability of Resources Through Child Welfare Encourages Overreporting**

Child welfare agencies’ taking on a material support role may incentivize other service providers to call on child welfare when they encounter families with concrete needs. Educators, health care professionals, and others may come to see child welfare as the clearest path to support. Child welfare officials recognized how their agency’s (actual or imagined) ability to assist families in need, rather than concerns about maltreatment, drove some hotline calls—“absolutely, absolutely,” according to an

ACS administrator. Service providers had seen the agency provide material support previously, administrators explained, so they turned to the agency again when encountering families with material needs. As another administrator said, “I think people think that that’s the only way, the fastest way, the best way or whatever, ‘cause they’ve seen it work. If the last struggling family needed X, Y, Z, you made this call, and they got it, and things are better now, so they do the same thing the next time.” After describing how DCF would provide baby supplies if a mother under investigation needed them, an investigator in Connecticut remarked, “That’s why they’ll make the report to DCF, so DCF would have to go out and provide those things.” In a case focused on a family’s housing conditions, the investigator attributed the report to the hospital “want[ing] to see what [DCF] can do to help the family,” rather than suspecting neglect. “They’re thinking that if they called us, then we could do something to help the family.”

In Connecticut, we interviewed professionals who indeed saw DCF as an agency potentially better suited to address families’ material needs. “A lot of times, they are willing to help link families to services,” explained a mental health clinician, adding, “They could help families with housing.” A police officer noted that families may need financial help, and he saw DCF as an avenue to that assistance: “The house was a disaster. I didn’t see any food in their refrigerator. . . . They may need a social worker to say, listen, do you know that there’s food stamps available to you, or this kind of counseling is afforded to you, what kind of health insurance is available to you if you don’t have financial means.” Likewise, a therapist reported her client, experiencing domestic violence, to DCF. This therapist did not want to see the client’s children removed, “but she needs some help” beyond the domestic violence concern, as she was facing eviction after losing her rental assistance. The therapist continued, “I was hoping between DCF and [the Department of Mental Health and Addiction Services] that they can help her with that. . . . She needs case management and supports. I can’t do all that from my office.” Because professionals feel limited in what they can do for families, DCF’s re-

source provision may spur reports that might not otherwise be made.

Professionals' perceptions are based on their prior experiences, and they also align with some child welfare agency messaging about the resources the agency can provide. In training for mandated reporters, for instance, DCF informs prospective callers about the supports available for cases on a lower risk, family assessment track. This track, the training describes, involves service plans and access to a community partner agency. As the training slide notes, these cases focus on what services can assist the family. In 2020, ACS rolled out a similar track for some reports deemed lower risk. The then-commissioner told the press, "Oftentimes, families reported to the New York state child abuse hotline are simply in need of a helping hand—whether that's food, clothing, or extra support—and specially trained child protective staff help connect those families to the resources they need" (quoted in Dalton 2020). With these messages, we can see how other service professionals might understand DCF and ACS as a reasonable place to turn to connect families with material resources, and ACS has acknowledged that its public statements sent this message. For instance, ACS received inquiries about how to refer families to this track specifically, indicating interest in the case management and resource provision components more so than an investigation of child maltreatment allegations.

Recognizing reports driven by families' resource needs rather than maltreatment concerns, DCF and ACS staff indicated that they hoped to shift course to prevent such situations from being routed to them. In a Connecticut training, a trainer acknowledged that the agency received many reports not necessitating a DCF response. This trainer put the onus on DCF to address the issue, saying, "we have to educate" prospective callers regarding when reports are and are not appropriate. Several ACS administrators described the agency's efforts to educate mandated reporters, especially in schools and hospitals, about situations not requiring a report. One administrator explained, "New York City is really thinking proactively about how to retrain and reframe people's thinking on this. . . . We're really working with

mandated reporters to help them understand where is the line between when you need to call and when you can really be thinking about connection with [alternative] supports?" Nevertheless, when the child welfare agency expands the resources it can provide, it becomes an appealing option for adjacent professionals. A limited social safety net, combined with vague definitions of neglect that could reasonably include conditions of poverty, means that frontline professionals may view child welfare as the most expedient way to get help for the families they work with, which ultimately increases families' exposure to an entity they find threatening (Fong 2023).

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

We find that the child welfare system is emerging as a gateway to, and gatekeeper of, the social safety net. In the absence of a robust and accessible safety net, progressive jurisdictions such as those we study are creating pathways and new resources for child welfare-involved families, including resources such as childcare and housing assistance that are specially earmarked for families with child welfare cases. Informally, too, caseworkers make an effort to get resources such as furniture, strollers, clothing, and food to families on their caseloads. Families trying to make ends meet have long relied on supplementary resources, given meager welfare benefits and low wages (Edin and Lein 1997; Edin and Shaefer 2016). In our study sites, a child welfare case can be a common conduit to basic support, with many child welfare-impacted families receiving some kind of material assistance. Ultimately, then, the welfare state of the twenty-first century is not solely a shift to work-based assistance supported by market logics, as others have previously outlined (Edin and Shaefer 2016; Soss et al. 2011). In addition, a system responsive to child abuse and neglect allegations is emerging as a key access point and means test for assistance.

We see this trend taking hold in visions for the implementation of the bipartisan Family First Prevention Services Act (Family First), an entitlement that can route federal dollars to child welfare systems to fund services for families labeled "at risk." Some jurisdictions have

sought approval for Family First implementation plans that use these funds expansively to provide discretionary concrete assistance. The deputy director of Child Welfare Services in Indiana, for instance, testified to Congress about using Family First dollars to purchase a vehicle for a parent struggling to get her children to school on time (Reed 2024). The think tank Chapin Hall requested federal approval to designate financial support as a standalone evidence-based service so that child welfare agencies can be reimbursed for providing cash assistance to families (Monahan et al. 2023). Likewise, New York State's child welfare agency piloted a guaranteed-income program for families who had been subject to low-risk investigations, aiming to build evidence for federal approval. A number of jurisdictions, including Kentucky, Indiana, and Washington, DC, as well as New York and Connecticut, have submitted Family First plans that would significantly expand child welfare systems to broadly address well-being along these lines. Although some systems are working to develop community pathways through which families could access supports without a child protective investigation, Family First conditions funding on recipients being at imminent risk of foster care entry, necessitating child welfare monitoring of the family and tying aid to the threat of family separation.

Positioning the child welfare agency as an entry point to material support may be an expedient way to target aid to a population considered at risk as well as a meaningful strategy to keep children out of foster care (or to get them home from foster care sooner). Moreover, the practices we identify reflect a recognition that conditions of poverty—which child welfare agencies have typically been ill-equipped to address—drive child maltreatment and system involvement, and that present economic policy and the social safety net are not sufficiently ameliorating these conditions. However, access through child welfare limits and changes safety net assistance in substantial ways. For instance, providing resources through child welfare puts it out of reach for families until a crisis builds, inviting maltreatment. Thus, rather than providing a floor of basic support to help protect families from crises, as welfare was de-

signed to do prior to TANF reform, distributing resources through child welfare directs support to families already at risk of child maltreatment—analogue to relying on emergency medical services rather than preventive primary care. Notably, however, child welfare differs from emergency health care in that it comes with surveillance and threats of family separation. When resources flow through the child welfare agency, families must accept the ongoing possibility of child removal and the stigmatizing label of abusive or neglectful parent to maximize their chances of obtaining needed assistance. Refashioning the child welfare agency as a resource provider also draws reports from others looking to connect families with assistance—reports that may not need a child welfare response specifically.

Additionally, when resources flow through child welfare agencies, these agencies and their frontline staff effectively serve as gatekeepers to aid. Unlike universal or eligibility-based income programs, such as guaranteed-income programs (Constantino et al. 2026, this issue), child welfare agencies have substantial discretion to assess families and determine whom they deem worthy of assistance. Kathryn Edin and Laura Lein (1998, 565), drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with nonprofit social service agencies, found that these agencies were most willing to “invest their scarce cash and voucher resources in those families they viewed as ‘good investments,’”—that is, those experiencing short-term crisis rather than those with chronic needs. We see some parallels in the child welfare case as well. Recall the investigators offering a furniture voucher to a family seen as having strengths and declining to fund hotels for those with histories of transiency. In this way, staff discretion may preclude those facing the greatest challenges from receiving needed resources.

At the same time, funneling assistance through child welfare agencies targets aid to families at risk of child maltreatment, and those determined to be at greater risk are eligible for additional resources. In this way, our findings complicate predominant conceptions of deservingness related to public assistance. Traditionally, states have restricted aid to parents deemed suitable and fit. Paradoxically, the

arrangement we articulate suggests that states are bestowing various forms of assistance on parents charged with abuse or neglect, the very people typically deemed unfit. In this case, the state attaches deservingness to designations of potential harm: Child welfare-involved families should receive help because they may endanger their children. Distributing aid in this way constructs people facing material hardship not so much as subjects in need, but as subjects at risk, opening them up to state surveillance and coercion on the basis of this perceived risk.

One way to understand this paradox is that it represents a further manifestation of a racist, classist narrative in which low-income parents and people of color must be monitored and managed when provided with resources. While recognizing that current safety net assistance is too low to provide for family well-being, this shift gives child welfare agencies—oriented around surveillance, coercion, and threats—control over resource provision, attaching even greater monitoring to these enhanced resources than public benefits agencies might require. At the administrative level, then, resource provision in child welfare constitutes an effort to compensate for gaps in the safety net. However, at the policy level, withdrawing aid from cash welfare and then placing assistance under the aegis of child welfare is part of a broader move toward maintaining marginalized families in a subordinate class requiring supervision—the next iteration of a classist and racist process of distributing aid.

Relatedly, our findings reflect a larger societal effort to provide for children, rather than parents, as worthy aid recipients (Bruch et al. 2026, this issue). In contrast to guaranteed income or direct cash transfers with few strings attached, which place parents in a position to act as trusted guardians of their children, the current safety net is largely structured to cover specific costs for families, rather than ensuring that parents have adequate income to provide these resources. Thus, our findings do not suggest that parents with child welfare cases are suddenly seen as morally worthy of assistance. Rather, the state aims to provide for their children—deemed deserving yet at risk—and it does so by conditioning aid on monitoring by

an agency with substantial authority to coerce compliance with state directives.

Ultimately, the emerging nationwide push to move child welfare toward a broader well-being system that takes increasing responsibility for the economic integrity of families reinforces a narrative that they merit assistance only when under state monitoring. This approach also stigmatizes them as abusive or neglectful. And since cash welfare supports for families are shrinking, this appealing strategic workaround potentially weakens political momentum for safety net assistance to more broadly address poverty. Although in the immediate term these efforts may provide important resources to families, in the long term, further shifting the safety net to run through child welfare tethers access to aid to designations of risk, intensive surveillance, and threats of family separation that undermine family well-being.

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