

# RECLAIMING SAFETY

**ANSWERING  
FREQUENTLY  
ASKED QUESTIONS  
ABOUT FAMILY  
POLICING  
ABOLITION**

# CONFRONTING THE "WHAT ABOUT..." QUESTIONS

**AUTHORS: ANGELA BURTON,  
ALAN DETTLAFF, MAYA PENDLETON**

Abolition is hopeful, aspirational, and above all, practical. Family policing abolitionists aspire to a world in which incidents of harm are met with care, compassion, healing, and connectedness. We reject the family policing system's approach to "child safety," which ruptures a child's ecological system, breeds fear and distrust, and "[tears the fabric of a child's life and community](#)." In this series, *Reclaiming Safety – Answering Frequently Asked Questions About Family Policing Abolition*, the upEND Movement examines the opportunities and challenges in identifying, creating, and realizing our goals of addressing harm to children without state interventions that rely on family separation and without causing further harm. In doing so, we seek responses that strengthen, rather than weaken, family and community relationships.

Numerous national and international bodies<sup>1</sup> now acknowledge the inherent racism of the family policing system's practice of family separation, tracing its origins back to the African slave trade. Stressing the role of racism, white supremacy, and the devaluation of family bonds in the legal and social systems designed to police and regulate Black families, these statements punctuate the reality that the racism embedded in family policing is so deeply rooted in the system's policies and structures that it cannot simply be revised or reformed.

The family policing system targets Black, Indigenous, and poor children and their families, funneling hundreds of thousands of children each year into the multi-billion dollar foster industry. Under the guise of “child protection” and “child welfare,” intersecting factors such as disability, mental health status, substance use, and intrafamilial violence lead to intense surveillance, regulation, and family separation in these communities. Under the label of “neglect,” the system ensnares a vast number of parents who may struggle to meet their children’s basic material needs – such as food, clothing, shelter, healthcare, and childcare – or who may face challenges providing consistently stable parenting, yet have not intentionally harmed their child. In relatively rare cases labeled “abuse,” a parent’s condition or behavior results in substantial harm to their child or has put their child’s life or health at significant risk of harm. Yet whether the charge is “neglect” or “abuse,” the system’s ultimate aim is to establish parental wrongdoing to justify government intrusion into the constitutionally protected sphere of the family and the parent-child relationship. In both cases, the state’s response is the same – intrusive, coercive, and punitive, causing more harm, disconnection, and destruction to the child, the parents, the family unit, and the community at large.

Calls to abolish the family policing system are often met with questions concerning the “What about...?” What about children who are seriously abused? What about children in homes with substance use? These questions, though at times well-intentioned, suggest the system is the only mechanism through which harm can be addressed. The reflexive impulse toward punishment is deeply ingrained in our consciousness, making it difficult for many to envision a society without institutions like “child protective services” and “foster care,” even while recognizing that the family policing system perpetuates racism, inequality, and violence across generations. In [\*Practising Everyday Abolition\*](#), Sarah Lamble explains how equating justice with punishment normalizes punitive responses to harm, observing that “carceral logics encourage us to locate the cause of the problem in an individual (bad choices, inherent evil, poor upbringing, cultural deficiencies, monstrous otherness, etc.) and then isolate and punish that individual and often stigmatise the community that person is part of.”

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In calling for abolition, we reject the carceral logics of the family policing system because we recognize that this system not only inflicts harm but also fails to prevent harm to children – even with its coercive power of family separation. Further, children who are in the “protective custody” of the state often experience severe and egregious harm. In a [recent report](#) examining the impact of family policing on Black children and families, New York’s Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights emphasizes that “what is often framed as a binary choice between protecting children and preserving family integrity is often a false dichotomy. Involvement in the child welfare system as it currently operates has been shown to inflict its own harms on children, and separation from family and placement in foster care generally has a profound, long-term negative impact on the child that can follow them for life.”

At the same time, abolitionists recognize that some parents do harm their children and that extreme cases of child maltreatment, such as sexual abuse or severe physical injury, do occur. In this recognition, abolitionists aim to understand why such harm occurs, what we do when harm occurs, and how we can foster the creation of a society where such harm does not occur. This is the work of abolition and this work is evident through [decades of abolitionist scholarship addressing questions of harm](#). Critics of family policing abolition often argue that ending family policing ignores the safety and well-being of children, claiming that abolition is not only idealistic or impossible but also dangerous. On the contrary, creating environments where all children and families have the resources they need to be safe and to live joyful and happy lives *within their homes and communities* is at the forefront of the family policing abolition movement.

Abolitionists are keenly aware of the urgent need for accessible, effective, flexible, and sustainable mechanisms to prevent harm to children, address harm when it occurs, and ensure children are safe from future harm. Accordingly, the goal of family policing abolition is multi-dimensional. We seek to end laws, policies, and practices that threaten and impair children’s safety, stability, health, and well-being. At the same time, we strive to use our collective energy and resources to ensure children are safe and that families are not needlessly torn apart. In doing so, we seek to identify and implement mechanisms for responding to harm that do not cause further harm but rather support individuals, families, and communities in autonomously identifying

and providing what is needed for safety, connection, healing, and the prevention of future harm.

This series of papers does not prescribe detailed policies and practices; we believe that work must be done and led by communities supported by reliable and sustainable resources. Our goal is to contribute to ongoing efforts and inspire new actions and innovations by asking questions and exploring potential pathways. Ultimately, we aim to deepen our understanding of the various ways justice for families can be achieved. The work of abolition involves not only preventing harm by creating peaceful, harmonious, and joyful environments but also normalizing care, collaboration, and personalized approaches to harm that center accountability, repair, healing, and connectedness.

Applying an abolitionist lens to envisioning a world free of family policing, we will explore a pressing question for many: *If we abolish family policing, what do we do when parents harm children?* Given that “child maltreatment” as defined in law, policy, and public opinion is complex and multi-faceted, this series will focus on specific contexts often cited as barriers to engaging with abolitionist ideas – physical and sexual abuse, intrafamilial violence, parental drug use or abuse, and parental disability. In these situations, we consider questions such as: *What principles, processes, and support mechanisms can empower individuals, families, and communities to autonomously identify and implement what is needed for safety, healing, and preventing future harm? What are effective responses to incidents or patterns of intrafamilial harm? What does justice look like in the context of intrafamilial harm?*

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Our hope is that deep engagement with these questions will inspire the critical and thoughtful development of humane responses to harm grounded in care, compassion, and love. By using an abolitionist lens and centering lessons from the lived expertise of children and parents impacted by the family policing system, we believe exploring these critical issues is necessary to clarify, refine, and articulate our vision for a society where a range of easily accessible and effective responses are available to address harm when harm occurs.

We do not claim to offer a definitive “blueprint” for addressing parental harm to children. Rather, our goal is to inspire life-affirming responses to harm that ensure children’s safety while respecting their autonomy; promote accountability for those who harm children; maintain, strengthen, and empower authentic connections; and create space for individual and collective healing and repair. Instead of definitive prescriptions, we pose questions to fuel our collective imagination about what family justice looks like in a world without family policing: *What are the expectations, responsibilities, and consequences when a parent harms a child? What community resources and individual capacities are necessary to respond effectively?*

Abolition is fundamentally about hope. It embodies both the belief that another world is possible and a commitment to building this other world now. By applying an abolitionist lens to imagine and create a world where children are safe and thriving without family policing,

we can avoid replicating or compounding the violence and harm of state-structured responses and reclaim individual, family, and community responsibility for safety, healing, and repair. Abolitionists reject the incrementalism of reformers who insist that, despite its flaws, the system is essential and that continued reforms – leaving intact the system’s core intervention of family separation – are the only way to address its horrific experiences and outcomes. Reformers also misrepresent abolitionist arguments by claiming that abolition will only result in children being harmed. This is fundamentally untrue.

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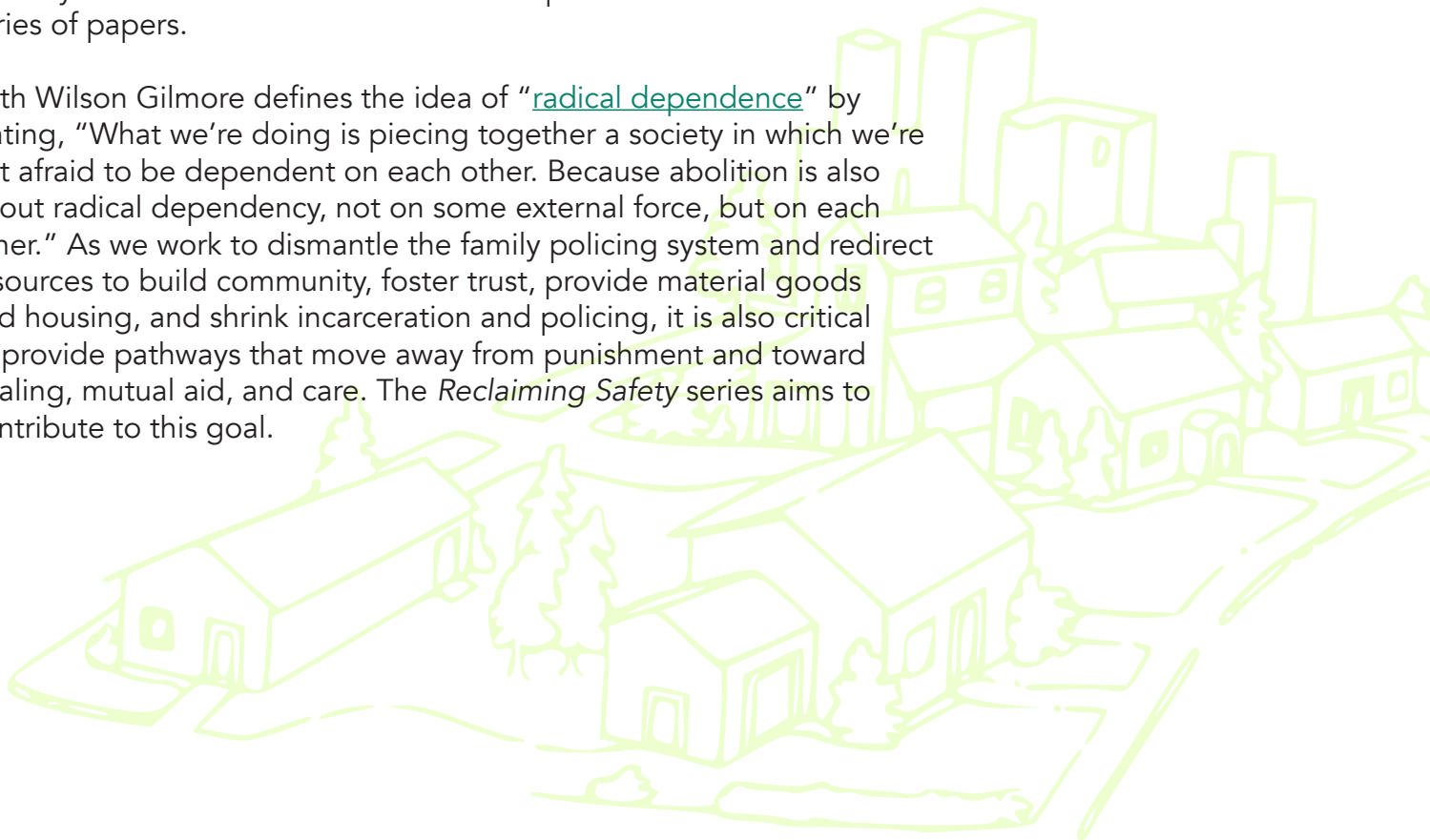
need to be safe and thrive within their homes and communities. They envision a society where a government system that forcibly separates children from their parents is so abhorrent as to be unthinkable. In this vision, resources are devoted to supporting the safety and well-being of children, families, and communities, and these communities work intensely, invest heavily, and collaborate creatively to ensure children are safe and families thrive. Thus, abolition is not merely about ending the family policing system; it is about creating societal conditions that render such a system obsolete.

Abolitionists envision a society where all children and families have everything they need to be safe and thrive within their homes and communities. They envision a society where a government system that forcibly separates children from their parents is so abhorrent as to be unthinkable.

Importantly, calls to end the family policing system do not lead to a new system to replace it. Within the world of prison reforms, Mariame Kaba refers to this as the “[Somewhere Else](#)” — the kinder, gentler place where certain “criminals” or other “undesirables” can be sent that is less harmful than prisons, but still keeps them far away from society. For people charged with drug-related offenses, this might be a mandatory treatment facility, while for others, this might be house arrest – both ideas that retain coercion and confinement. In the world of family policing reforms, this manifests in efforts such as [Thriving Families, Safer Children](#), a national effort sponsored by the Children’s Bureau and its philanthropic supporters to “transform child welfare into a child and family well-being system” that purports to focus on prevention while still retaining its functions of surveillance and family separation.

In their book, [Prison by Any Other Name: The Harmful Consequences of Popular Reforms](#), Maya Schenwar and Victoria Law question the logic behind reform efforts that merely replace one form of coercion with another and pose the question, “What would it look like for there to simply be no Somewhere Else?” This is the question at the core of every abolitionist effort. And this is the question at the core of this series of papers.

Ruth Wilson Gilmore defines the idea of “[radical dependence](#)” by stating, “What we’re doing is piecing together a society in which we’re not afraid to be dependent on each other. Because abolition is also about radical dependency, not on some external force, but on each other.” As we work to dismantle the family policing system and redirect resources to build community, foster trust, provide material goods and housing, and shrink incarceration and policing, it is also critical to provide pathways that move away from punishment and toward healing, mutual aid, and care. The *Reclaiming Safety* series aims to contribute to this goal.



## AUTHORS

Angela Burton's over 30-year career as a lawyer, law professor, scholar, and public servant has focused on advancing the human, constitutional, and civil rights of families. She currently works with numerous local, state, and national advocacy groups to abolish the family policing/family regulation system and to direct our collective resources to support parents, families, and communities in raising healthy, thriving, and joyful children.

Alan Dettlaff is a scholar, author, and abolitionist. Alan began his career as a social worker in the family policing system. Today his work focuses on ending the harm that results from this system. He is author of *Confronting the Racist Legacy of the American Child Welfare System: The Case for Abolition*, published by Oxford University Press in 2023.

Maya Pendleton has been a part of the upEND movement since its inception. She currently works as researcher and writer for the upEND movement, focusing on how we abolish the family policing system, the harms of the current system to children, families and communities, and the world we will build post family policing.



*Reclaiming Safety* is an anthology from upEND Movement answering critical questions about family policing abolition. New essays will be released from Fall 2024 through Spring 2025 at [upendmovement.org/safety](https://upendmovement.org/safety)

## CITATION

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## ENDNOTES

1. New York Advisory Committee to the United States Commission on Civil Rights, 2024: <https://www.usccr.gov/files/2024-05/ny-child-welfare-system-sac-report.pdf>  
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