

# Still, we rise: Lessons learned from lived experiences in the family policing system

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## Abstract

The voices of mothers affected by the child welfare system are forefronted in this article. A group of five women, all affiliated with the parent-led, community-based organization Rise Magazine, gathered to discuss their experiences, including any role they believed race, racism and other forms of bias played in their child welfare cases. Their powerful, first-hand accounts illustrate the systemic injustices faced by child welfare affected families. This article also focuses on the development of Rise's organizational structure as a space where parents both lead and drive the organization's mission to empower and support system affected families. A postscript by Tricia Stephens, integrating how parents' experiences are reflected in existing research, is provided. It is the hope of the parents who currently work at and those who have passed through Rise, that sharing their personal stories inspires and helps to guide others across the country.

## KEYWORDS

bias, child welfare, parent advocacy, parent leadership, parents rights, racism

## Key points for the family court community

- Racism within child welfare was the overarching theme of this special issue and was reflected throughout mothers' accounts of their experiences.

- However, mothers' nuanced insights, included intersectional discussions on race, mental health, intimate partner violence, education and the child welfare system.
- The feeling of belongingness and community among mothers, like what they described at Rise, is a powerful reparative force in their lives, serving as a place of “family”, as well as a training ground for parents to become child welfare change agents.

## INTRODUCTION

*“As our children are our futures, we need to educate them with the tools they need to survive and reimagine the world we all deserve to live and thrive in.” – Rise Parents*

This article was developed with and co-authored by child welfare affected parents whose insights are often missing from the scholarly literature, policies and practices that directly affect their families. We begin with an introduction to the organization Rise Magazine (referred to hereafter as Rise), home to the parent contributors/authors of this article. Parents then share their experiences at Rise and how their involvement with the organization has affected their lives. Next, we delve into parents' accounts of their time in child welfare. We explore their perspectives on the ways in which racism, classism, mental health and educational bias, and negative views of their own involvement in the system as children, affected their individual child welfare cases. We close with a postscript by Tricia Stephens exploring how the existing research in this area connects with parents' experiences, underscoring the immediate need for systemic change.

Parents affected by child removal and family separation have been self-advocating since the 1980s, when the number of primarily Black children in New York City's child welfare system ballooned to over 50,000 (Tobis, 2013). Parents, the vast majority Black and Brown, and their allies fought tirelessly to change the system that seemed to reflexively use separation as a first option. Rise, a parent-led organization, emerged within this context in 2005 and supports the development of parent leadership and movement building to dismantle the child welfare system. Rise views this system as a family policing system which has enacted cycles of harm, surveillance and punishment within the city's Black and Brown neighborhoods that are living with poverty. The terms child welfare system and family policing system are used interchangeably throughout this article.

Rise's mission and work have evolved with time. In its early years, the organization supported child welfare-affected parents via narrative writing which was published in a parent-focused magazine—becoming a resource for the general public to access a perspective on child welfare involvement previously unavailable. Rise has served hundreds of child welfare affected parents since its founding, many who are numb, in shock or disoriented when they first make contact. After over a decade of working with parents going through similar hardships, many related in ways no one but a parent impacted could understand, Rise's mission has expanded to include a focus on parent education about the history of the family policing system and its disproportionate and destructive impact in minority communities.

Rise trains parents for professional work as Parent Advocates (PAs) through the organization's Rise and Shine curriculum. While some PAs across the country do not have lived child welfare experience, Rise values the *knowing* that distinguishes their PAs in meaningful ways that they bring to their work. They use the lessons learned from their embodied experiences, along with education about the child welfare system, to actively support system-involved

parents. Rise has trained over 50 parents to become PAs who are embedded in their communities, distributing information about parents' rights and how the child welfare system operates. Rise is also training PAs who work or will work within foster care and preventive agencies across NYC.

Though its mission has evolved, Rise's core goal remains the same. The parents and allies who comprise the organization envision a different tomorrow for all of NYC's families. Having felt the pain of separation, they wish to see a system that removes children from their parents, replaced by one that takes the time to learn about the desires, hopes and needs of families so they can meet them where they are. Fatigued by decades of surveillance and policing, they are demanding a tomorrow where communities are invested in and families supported, so that children can be raised by their parents, within the context of their culture and community.

## Convening a conversation about race and child welfare

When approached to contribute to this special issue, Jeanette Vega-Brown, the Co-Executive Director at Rise, asserted that the article needed to reflect the foundation that Rise is built on, hearing and learning directly from parents impacted by child welfare, to then develop solutions that support parents' needs and wants. Five parents, all mothers, convened over Zoom in the summer of 2022 to have this discussion. All lived within the bounds of NYC, therefore their experiences heavily reflect the policies and practices of child welfare agencies within that geographic area. Lasting for just over an hour, the conversation was transcribed using a web-based transcription service, authenticated against the video-recording and then shared with the group for verification that it reflected their contributions. Tricia Stephens worked closely with Jeanette Vega-Brown to develop this article from that conversation and added relevant sources from the child welfare research literature as indicated, along with a postscript.

*Acknowledgement.* First, we ask readers to acknowledge how difficult of an ask it is for parents to revisit one of the most painful periods of their lives. Between 4 and 20 years had passed since most of their cases were closed (only one mother had an active case at the time of the conversation). The pain and trauma of those experiences linger and this discussion was undertaken with great care. Elena shared,

*"My kids have grown, the healing had happened for me - long time ago. And so, it's like kinda difficult to look at the wound that's already sealed with scar tissue on top of it."*

Therefore, their decision to participate in this conversation and writing of this article was not undertaken lightly. Elena, and the other mothers in the group, share their stories purposefully, as all parents at Rise are trained to do. Their intention in sharing is twofold. First, to help other parents who are system-affected know that they are not alone, and second, to provide knowledge that helps change the lives of individual parents and the system at large.

This willingness to share comes from an earned trust for Rise described by several of the mothers in the group. Lindsay shared that in the other parents and facilitators at Rise, she found a place where she felt a sense of belonging. "Rise has provided me with the family I don't have and the space to be me and always be welcomed." Similarly, Paige credits Rise with, "empowering me to know my own strength. Being at Rise has been a life changing experience for me. I love the Rise team and we have become family." Jeanette described her commitment to securing such a space for parents like her and all the mothers in the conversation,

*"I think it still traumatizes me when I work with parents and I hear that the same craziness I went through 20 years ago, parents is still experiencing. I think that's why I stay dedicated in this work. It's important that their kids are not going through the system the way we went through [it]. It's like a cycle that's crazy. When I work with parents now and I hear [their stories], - like racism, bias, my color, because I don't have no money, I couldn't afford childcare- I'm just like, why are these families still going through the same thing I went through 20 years ago. And how can we try to make something different?"*

## LESSONS LEARNED

### Race and class in the subtext—subtle and devastating

It is rare for overtly racist statements to be made in child welfare settings. This became apparent in the ways in which references to race and racism emerged in the conversation among the five mothers. For instance, Lindsay, who is phenotypically white and a mother to biracial children, did not explicitly ascribe her challenges in the family policing system to racism. Instead, she spoke candidly about her struggles with her mental health and her fear that her diagnosis was being used against her in her efforts to regain custody of her children. A survivor of a marriage marked by intimate partner violence (IPV), Lindsay's experience brings life to two of the most cited reasons for child welfare involvement, mental health issues and domestic violence.

*“I noticed that they treat me differently. Like, you know, because they know I have the mental health issues and when I'm stressed out, like that's when it comes out. So, like the workers or whatever would try to like make it very urgent, [that was] stressful for me because I feel like they knew it was gonna exacerbate like my mental health. I feel like a lot of times they would make it seem like I was crazy or something was wrong.”*

Still, race and racial bias emerged in the subtext of Lindsay's interactions with child welfare workers—in the subtle, everyday microaggressions that so many parents and their allies find frustrating because they are harder to call out than blatantly racist remarks. Lindsay shared,

*“My kids have experienced, um, ignorant comments by workers. I was just learning how to do my daughter's hair. You know, my daughter's father was Trinidadian and I was trying to learn how to do her hair. And the workers said, “why is her hair so nappy?” And I asked the worker, what do you mean by that? You know, like I was trying, you know, with the pink lotion, you try to moisturize it, you try to do everything. I was like, you have no right to be commenting on the texture of my daughter's hair! And she looked at me and she was like, “but you don't know how to do her hair. You know, you're not equipped to do it.” And I was like, you know what? I'll figure it out. Like you have no right. Who are you to tell me how to do my daughter's hair? And that's just a little example of stuff that they've said.”*

For mothers who were phenotypically Black and Brown, race was everywhere. Though her case has been closed for over 5 years, Kimberley (Kim) described still feeling like the threat of system re-entry loomed over her family. She described the family policing system, “as a cancer that can come back at any time without notice.” Kim was adamant that she believed overt racism and classism played a major role in her child welfare case. As a Black woman, she is attuned to the many ways in which racism appears in her life. Kim also lives with mental health issues and states that her children were removed from her care when she took them with her to the hospital emergency room when seeking treatment for herself.

*“I recognized that I got ill and I needed some support around my mental stability, my emotional distress. And I didn't even think I was gonna be penalized for asking for help. But that's what happened. I got literally penalized and persecuted. Um, I took the three children with me to the hospital because I didn't wanna leave them home alone. And they were at an age where they could have stayed alone, 15, 12 and 7. But they have special needs, so, I took 'em with me and they [hospital staff] said that I was neglectful. I don't see where the hell I was neglectful, because I took them with me to the hospital and I fed them prior to going the hospital because I know it's a long damn wait in the hospital.”*

Kim continued, identifying how race and class intermingle:

*“Race, definitely plays a role. It played a role in my case. I always give the example about if I had the disposable income to have a nanny, that shit would never happen that way [referring to her having to take her children with her to the hospital], you know, but I chose not to leave them with their alcoholic father.”*

Paige's experience illustrates the multiple layers of bias Black mothers face in the child welfare system. She was placed in the foster care system as a child and was familiar with its inner workings from the perspective of a foster alum. When she became a mother, she felt the constant comparison to white, heteronormative standards of family from questions by child welfare workers ranging from the number of children she had, to her right to demand a certain quality of care while they were placed in foster care.

*“I'm a young mom. I had five kids when it happened, cause my son is two. ‘Oh, you have five kids? We, we don't understand.’ [Paige described the reactions of CW workers to her family size]. And then there's the other thing - ‘Oh, why did you have five kids?’ Why is that any of your business why I had five kids? I laid down. I had 'em right. Mind your business. Like it's like so many bias when they, you know, they treat us in a certain way and not ask the right questions. Like you don't ask nobody why they have how many kids they have, like who does that?!. You're judging me because of how many kids I got. That's none of your business. They taken care of. Cause when I seen them [referring to how her children looked while in the custody of foster care providers] I'm like oh, so you give these people money! Where the money going? I'm bringing them clothes. They were like, ‘oh, you can't bring them clothes.’ They told me I couldn't bring my kids clothes and I'm supposed to let them look like this. My girls' hair, literally from the time they left me, September 20th, they had the same hairstyle in their hair til October. So, we, me and my sister, went to [the visitation site], I'm like, you take one hair out. I'll take another. We, was taking their hair out with them two hours. Cause they [foster care providers] didn't. It's like they don't have no care in the world. How you, why are you paying these people? What are you paying them [for]? That these kids look like this.”*

Paige's frustration was shared by Kim who described having to advocate to keep her son in the school she had selected for him after the foster caregiver wanted to move him to a school that was more convenient for school drop off and pick up.

*“She [foster mother] told me she was going to have to change his school. I was like oh no honey, I worked for [her son to get into the name of a well-resourced school in a wealthy Manhattan neighborhood]. I dare you. I dare you! I don't care if the foster mother bring him there on her back, he better be in the school that I put him in.”*

Kim knows that many Black and Brown children in NYC attend schools that are overcrowded, and under-resourced. She was aware of the impact moving her son for convenience would have on his future, and refused to accept what is routinely foisted upon Black and Brown families in child welfare. While in care, their children's lives are subject to substantial change, some of which suit the immediate needs of foster care providers, but which negatively impact their opportunities in the future.

## **Child welfare fears and involvement persisting across generations**

Elena described the period during which she was involved with the family policing system as a time when “they were trying to pull this whole system together with glue and paper.” Her experience as an affected parent, and now as an

advocate, allowed for a rich discussion within the group of how the child welfare system has evolved. Elena, who is phenotypically Black, did not overtly identify racism as her greatest challenge while involved with child welfare. Remarkably, she described a form of “*education discrimination*” where she detailed her struggle to get past her intake interview when she mentioned to her caseworker that she had a master’s degree in social work. Noting that at the time, qualifications for entry level child welfare workers required little more than a high school degree, she described engaging workers in lengthy discussions about her training in graduate school. In a voice that betrayed the hurt that lingers. Elena outlined deftly trying to not upset her caseworkers as she indulged their questions. She had to patiently wait for an opening to return to the reason she was there with them—getting her children back. She reflected on the irony of her counseling her caseworkers rather than the other way around. It is impossible to understand whether Elena’s education served as a potential shield against racial bias at the time of her involvement. What is clear from the conversation is that she understood the racial implications of how the family policing system operated then, and now.

Elena draws a direct line between contemporary child welfare practices and the historical trauma of chattel enslavement for Black people. “*This is slavery in the making right. This is the same thing they did to us through slavery. They took our children, they separated us.*” She highlighted the overlap between the child welfare and carceral systems, detailing the ways in which this influences her role with her grandchildren. Elena shared,

*“You gotta train your kids with phone numbers and names of people and you gotta give them scenarios. I tell you this is what Rise brought up for me. The conversations with my older kids to have with their kids. So to pre-warn the kids of the conversations to have and not to have, and it’s sad that you gotta do this but you have to pre-warn them about a society that’s geared to separate us”*

Elena noted that from where she sits, after decades, *nothing has really changed.*

Paige talked about her childhood experiences in the family policing system being unearthed and used against her in Family Court as an adult parent.

*“Back then my mom had cases. And I’m like, well, that was, then. This is now. That has nothing to do with me. I was just a child. So, they were like, oh, you’re a bad person now, oh, you’re, you’re a bad mom. Cuz, your kids are in the system now too [describing how her past behaviors were being depicted in court]. You, you let your kids get in the system because oh you were already in the system.”*

Paige was removed from her mother and adopted by her biological aunt as a child. She shared, in an accounting all too familiar in communities where poverty reigns, that her grandmother would “*call BCW*” on her aunt to try to get custody of her, after she realized that custody came with a reliable monthly check. Paradoxically, the system that entrenched itself in every aspect of Paige’s family life held itself harmless for its own impact across generations of her family. Her children were placed in kinship care but Paige states that she was doing all of the parenting responsibilities, while the kinship foster-caregiver received substantial funding. She was simply grateful for the time with her children, however, she wished the system would have provided guidance and support - not separation and long-lasting trauma for her and her children.

## **The future of parent leadership**

Jeanette is Rise’s first parent leader, and now serves as the organization’s co-Executive Director. She shares her own family policing case as a young Puerto Rican mother and how it continues to inform her leadership style:

*“My case lasted 3 years, I was 17 with my first son and the system said I was a monster and had violent tendencies. For one mistake they tore my whole life upside down. I did not know how to live without my son and visiting 1 time a week for 2 hours felt like torture to both of us. My rage, anger and hate toward the system became stronger overtime and that for them reflected anger management issues, violent tendencies and harm to my child. What they missed was my sadness and loneliness of not having my baby and I was judged for being a Puerto Rican mother. Racism and Bias played out in many ways, the agency's judgment of my culture and upbringing, the courts bias on how I was dressed did not fit what they wanted to see. As I moved past this after my baby's return home the fear of the system coming back always stayed with me but I also needed to help other families not feel what I felt or go through what I went through.*”

Jeanette's experience within the system led her to determinedly preserve a space where parents who have been told that they are monsters, as she was, have a place to enter willingly.

*“Today I am honored to say I am leading Rise as a parent impacted who has overcome the bias of the world that [believes] we can't lead and that we are not powerful enough. My role now is to elevate other parents' voices as we did today and help parents see the power within them. Rise does not give parents power- we help you see the power that was already there. The system makes you powerless and not confident in anything. Rise and the amazing parents I work with have empowered me to fight harder and louder and they have helped build my confidence over the years to lead such an amazing, powerful organization that is not led by me but by the amazing strong mothers some you heard from today.”*

Rise operates from the foundation that parents need to be supported at any phase of their lives. Parents may need some guidance, support or resources to navigate and address their situations. Jeanette sums up her experience within the organization,

*“I remember it being the feeling of the space, the people's truth, the care that kept me wanting to come back. As scary as it felt to be in a space where everyone was talking about child welfare, it also gave me ease that my experiences were not as isolated as I thought, that feeling of hate and rage was normal and that it was okay to cry and say that it tore me up in a way that only those in that room can really understand. That's what Rise brings! A space where no matter where you come from, what your apartment looks like, what your truth brings, we respect, appreciate and value parents for who they are and all they bring to the space.”*

Jeanette wrote this section using the first person. When we decided to create Rise and Shine (parent leadership curriculum), we had to think with our parents to understand what worked, what helped us want to share ourselves, be in space with each other and move forward in this work. It was that sense of peace and care. I know you have never heard of workplaces that make you feel proud and safe at work but that's what makes Rise a genuine space you can only get and feel that at Rise. We offer opportunities for growth in different areas and we genuinely care about the families that enter our spaces. We celebrate our birthdays and our children's birthdays together, we give to each other unselfishly and without judgment. We are parents first at Rise and that is what drives our passion for this work. We want to be part of making the changes to support family well-being. Through our programs we are creating Peer support networks that families say they want and need. Bringing what you experience at Rise into communities to never feel isolated, alone or afraid to say we need support. Be part of the change and join Rise as we elevate parent leadership and fight for our children's futures.

## POST-SCRIPT

While race and racism were replete in the accounts provided by mothers, their experiences were nuanced, reflecting an intersectionality of humanistic problems such as intimate partner violence, and struggles with mental health.

These problems are not isolated to child welfare affected parents, but existing research has documented their high correlations with child welfare involvement (Casanueva et al., 2008; Ghertner et al., 2018; Libby et al., 2007; Magen et al., 2000; Oliveros & Kaufman, 2011). The ways in which references are made to mental health issues and IPV in settings like family team conferences, Family Court hearings and foster care visits, for example a worker may reduce the account provided earlier by Kim to, “birth mother has mental health”, may give the impression that these struggles are anathema to good enough parenting. However, these problems are distributed across all racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic groups. Yet, some groups, most often mothers, people of color (specifically Black and Native American), and America’s poor of all racial/ethnic identities, are most likely to become child welfare involved. Parents with racial and economic privilege routinely address these difficult problems privately—their families remain intact and outside of the reach of a policing system that has resulted in more than one in ten Black children living in foster care between birth and age 18 (Wildeman & Emanuel, 2014). My own research with fathers in a trauma-informed group for men with an IPV charge, highlighted the stark racial divide in who becomes child welfare involved when IPV is present or alleged in relationships (Stephens, 2020). Of the 14 fathers I interviewed, 13 identified as Black/Latinx— each had been issued an order of protection and mandated to treatment. The sole white father in the group was self-referred, and, according to the agency where the group was hosted—he was an accurate reflection of the one or two white fathers who voluntarily sought their services annually. That some parents routinely become child welfare involved, and others do not, is not a sign of a broken system, it is an expectable outcome of a system that was born into a country already centuries into the creation of race as a social construct and racism as the tool that ensured dire outcomes for all groups other than monied whites. To believe otherwise is to be disingenuous about this country’s history and its every day, contemporary operation.

Research tells us that it is possible to parent with life’s humanistic challenges. In fact, Casanueva et al. (2008) found that maternal parenting is not necessarily impaired by involvement in an IPV relationship, their work adding to existing research findings. Some of the decisions taken by the mothers in this discussion illustrate the ways in which mothers parent within the IPV context. Kim, for example, took her children to the hospital with her rather than leave them with her now ex-husband when she went to seek her own mental health treatment. Her effort to keep her children safe was met with deep suspicion, the soundness in her decision-making either dismissed or overlooked. Elena’s system involvement was sparked by an ex-husband who vowed to call the local child welfare authorities “*until they came*”, a common tactic of exerting power and control once a partner has extricated themselves from an undesired relationship. The child welfare system took those calls without screening for the potential for abuse of the reporting system by people like Elena’s ex. While many system-involved mothers are parenting in the IPV context, Langenderfer-Magruder et al. (2019) highlighted the continued urgent need for improved assessment, collaboration and tailored intervention for these mothers.

Overt acts of racism are rare in child welfare settings, yet the disproportionality that has persisted for decades for families of color is undeniable (Clark et al., 2008; Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020). One possible explanation for how racism operates is in the subjectivity that influences decision-making at each step of the child welfare system. For example, the defuse way in which neglect is defined in child maltreatment gives tremendous weight to the subjectivity of the person assessing parents, and it is in this subjectivity that racial and class bias find their greatest leeway for expression. With white, heteronormative practices remaining as the standard bearer for good enough parenting in the United States, parents who fall outside of that norm, parents like Paige, Kim or Lindsay, are viewed with suspicion and often labeled as deviant. Specifically, Kim’s experience at the hospital where she took her children with her to ensure their safety, was viewed with suspicion. Kim’s story is not anomalous among Black mothers from communities dealing with poverty (Presler, 2021). Concerns that medical providers will remove their children when they seek medical care has emerged as a consideration for many Black mothers in how they parent. Rebbe et al. (2019) found that hospitals that serve more Medicaid patients, have higher reporting rates of infantile substance exposure. Their study was located in Washington state and their findings showed that Native American mothers were more likely to be reported for child maltreatment than white mothers. Mothers of color are scrutinized more closely than white mothers. The workers that Kim interacted with at the hospital were unable to see her parenting within the



context that she was living in, and according to Presler, any “reasonable” suspicion of maltreatment on the part of workers can quickly be elevated and considered imminent risk.

Fear of family separation on the part of Black parents is legitimate (Rise, 2021), and has resulted in grandparents like Elena assuming that her grandchildren will be investigated, possibly removed and placed into foster care. She has adapted what good caregiving means to future generations of her family to include preparing them for this possibility. This is what it means to live and parent in Black bodies in America. Many Black parents have had to have a similar “talk” with their children, especially the boys in their families, to prepare them for encounters with the police that may suddenly turn deadly, even if they comply. The American reality is that people living in Black bodies are subject to everyday acts of racism that can vary in intensity from seemingly minor microaggressions to acts of systemic racial violence that could separate their families for years.

The ability to hold space for this lived reality is why, for me, Rise's stance on training PAs with the lived experience of family policing system involvement is necessary (Rise, 2021). While the work done by PAs has been shown to be essential in multidisciplinary teams that assist parents to navigate the child welfare and Family Court requirements (Gerber et al., 2019; Lalayants, 2017), it is the personal resonance of their understanding of how the system works that I have seen change parents' lives. I have had the good fortune to be asked to lead and now co-lead with a parent trainer, the trauma portion of the Rise and Shine curriculum for the past several years. This segment of the training contains profoundly personal and potentially unsettling material for parents. As trauma is discussed, many parents see their lives reflected in the content we cover. It is precisely at these moments that I have seen senior PAs activate to hold the potentially overwhelming emotions that come up for trainees in what Donald Winnicott termed the “holding environment,” their knowing creating safe boundaries within which these painful memories can emerge and be contained. This is not containment from a cerebral place, it is holding from the heart. This is the unique contribution and value of peer support detailed in the research literature (Libby et al., 2007; Mead & MacNeil, 2006; Repper & Carter, 2011). The nuance provided by Elena's lived experiences, and other PAs like her, resonates with parents who have faced similar hurdles in lives. These parents often do not feel understood by the workers and service providers who engage with them, and this can be incredibly isolating (Stephens et al., 2021). Having a space where they feel seen and understood, without needing to explain or defend themselves, is rare and necessary.

Families of color cannot sustain the current level of surveillance and policing. Black and Native families bear the brunt of this burden. While, at 22% of the children in foster care (United States Department of Health and Human Services [USDHHS], 2021), Latinx families appear to have proportional rates of separation relative to their census numbers, but those who live in areas where Latinx families living with poverty are concentrated, see much higher rates of investigation and family disruption. According to the 2021 Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (AFCARS) report, children who identify as more than two races make up 8% of those in foster care, continuing a startling trend as the fastest growing demographic of children in foster care (USDHHS, 2021). Parenting is not new to families of color. Prior to interfacing with white settler colonialism that extracted land from Native tribes, decimating their cultural practices and ways of life, and instituted chattel slavery for Black families for centuries—Black and Native families lived in relative peace without external oversight. The investigative mindset often directed toward families of color sends the implied message that somehow, families of color—especially Black and Native families do not know how to parent and cannot be trusted to raise their own children. The child welfare system cannot claim grand success in helping families to be better than they found them. This surveillance and policing has worn families down—some families for generations. It is time for this to end. Families who need help should not be processed or treated like criminals. Billions of dollars are spent within the child welfare system around families, when what many families need the most is a modest increase in their income to better support their children. Change is needed and the time for change is now.

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The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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**Jeanette Vega-Brown** Co-Executive Director of Rise Magazine, coordinates Rise's policy impact through her role in advocacy collaborations and on NYC and statewide tasks forces and through public speaking and media. Jeanette has played a key role in developing Rise's strategic plan and shift to community organizing, as well as Rise's major programs since 2019: the Rise & Shine leadership training program for parents, training for Parent Advocates, and our Reunification Collaborative and TIPS approach to ensuring that parents have the information to navigate the system.

Jeanette has contributed to Rise since 2008 and became a Parent Leader in 2016. In 2018, she was promoted to Training Director and in 2020, she was promoted to Assistant Director, before becoming Co-Executive Director in June 2021.

Jeanette graduated from the Child Welfare Organizing Project's Parent Leadership Training in 2005 and was one of the first Parent Advocates to staff Child Safety Conferences in New York City. Jeanette worked as a Parent Advocate at Episcopal Social Services for 4 years and is also certified as a visiting coach/host.

Jeanette's passion and dedication to this work and organization comes from wanting all parents to be the lead voices in changing systems and building community power. Parents know what parents need.

Jeanette is a proud wife and mother of four awesome boys.

**Tricia N. Stephens** is a scholar, educator and social work direct practitioner in New York City, NY. She joined the faculty at the Silberman School of Social Work at Hunter College in 2015, after completing her doctoral studies at New York University's Silver School of Social Work. Dr. Stephens' work is fueled by her firm belief in the power and possibility of recovery and healing after exposure to trauma. As such, she engages in knowledge development that forefronts the strengths and resilience of those who have survived trauma and examines the ways in which they have also thrived. Focusing on poverty-impacted, parents of color who have been affected by the American child welfare system, Dr. Stephens' work also includes a focus on the effects of their interactions with the institutions built to serve them. Her work with community-based and grass-roots organizations has exposed the need for disruption in policies and practices that have evolved over time to strictly regulate families, especially families of color living with poverty.

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