

Book Review

Torn Apart

*How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families—
And How Abolition Can Build a Safer World*

Dorothy Roberts

Basic Books (2022)

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Introduction

Dorothy Roberts' (2002) *Torn Apart* offers a searing indictment of the U.S. child welfare system—reframing it as a carceral institution rooted in racialized control. This review situates *Torn Apart* within JNEL's Special Themed Issue on Foster Care. Through four parts—"Terror," "Design," "The Carceral Web," and "Abolition"—Roberts exposes how the system surveils and punishes families under the guise of care, while disproportionately targeting Black and Brown communities. She challenges the adequacy of reform and advances a compelling abolitionist framework grounded in mutual aid, kinship care, and community investment. For nonprofit practitioners, educators, and leaders, this book provides a critical mirror—demanding reflection on the moral and institutional foundations of service delivery. As debates around censorship and systemic inequities intensify, *Torn Apart* emerges as required reading for justice-centered public servants and this review provides readers with a springboard of references from which to embark. As two of the millions of individuals touched in different ways by the U.S. child welfare system—survivors in many ways, we find that *Torn Apart* is the real deal—a valid, reliable, illuminating exposé of the realities experienced by those touched by the system.

Torn Apart: Abolition, Social Equity, and the Nonprofit Sector's Reckoning with Family Policing

In this volume, child protective services (CPS) is not the implementer of benevolent interventions to save children, but rather the instrument of a family policing system designed as a tool for surveillance, separation, and social control—especially

targeting Black families. Roberts—an advocate, researcher, activist, and abolitionist—adds another vital pillar to contemporary scholarship while building on her landmark *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare* (2001).

With *Torn Apart*, Roberts makes an impassioned, critical, well-informed and powerful case for abolition—not merely reform—of a system she understands and recognizes as irredeemably rooted in racist, classist, and carceral logics. Her well-articulated, sourced, relatable, and impactful argument significantly touched and impacted the authors of this book review, so much so, that while initially critical—and possibly even dismissive—of the abolitionist argument, the book review authors have been swayed enough to recognize the merit, basis, and overall strength of the abolitionist argument and now encourage readers to carefully consider it. As noted by Roberts (2022),

the belief that Black children's problems are caused by their families and the solution is to tear them apart secures policies that criminalize Black children and their parents while impeding policies that would help them thrive. By relying on policing families as the way to protect children, the system blocks imagining a society that is safer for children. (p. 289)

We concur. For all public servants—for all in civil society—especially for nonprofit educators, practitioners, and leaders, *Torn Apart* offers a critical mirror, demanding a radical reconsideration of how our organizations engage with, replicate, or resist systems of oppression.

This review is part of the *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership's* special issue on foster care, adoption, social equity, and the nonprofit sector. Consistent with understanding social equity as pertaining to “public services being fair for everyone in regard to access, processes, quality, and outcomes” (Guy & McCandless, 2025, p. vii), this book review aims to uplift Roberts' abolitionist call as not just a theoretical critique, but a practical imperative for nonprofit leadership, ethical responsibility, and justice-centered public service. This is consistent with ideals recently expressed in the literature that contend that “if the world is to be more equitable throughout the 21st century and into the 22nd century, administrators in all sectors must be competent in how to promote fairness to all” (Johnson & Meyer, 2022, p. vii).

Additionally, this review was designed to also function as a key resource for readers in places and spaces where certain topics, books, and other content, discourses, and resources are under attack—or outright banned. Accordingly, readers will find an implications discussion that provides a number of additional go-to resources to help them further engage relevant literature.

Exposing the Machinery of Family Policing

Torn Apart is presented in four major parts—“Terror,” “Design,” “The Carceral Web,” and “Abolition.” Each part is crafted to build on the central argument: the child welfare system is not broken; it is functioning precisely as designed. Critically immersing the reader, Roberts expertly scaffolds her argument—crouched in understanding, care, compassion, equity, justice, and love. From the outset, the introduction, aptly titled “The Benevolent Terror,” dismantles the myth that CPS protects children—detailing the real and horrific experience of family policing. Roberts illustrates how children are abruptly taken from their homes—from maternity wards, schools, even

playgrounds—often under the guise of care, but legitimized with the force of law enforcement and court-sanctioned trauma. The child welfare system is more of a destructive system often confused with being a helpful service provider that has policed Black families for far too long, so much so, that most Black children will encounter an experience with CPS at least once in their lifetime. In many situations caseworkers and police officers conduct investigations and inspections of environments “for what in their opinion constitutes a risk to children. Based on state child neglect laws, the investigators interpret conditions of poverty—lack of food, insecure housing, inadequate medical care—as evidence of parental unfitness” (Roberts, 2022, p. 21). This benevolent terror not only conflates conditions of poverty for parental unfitness, it demonstrates how the threat of removing one’s children is legitimized by the law and how “this surveillance constitutes the stop-and-frisk of Black families that falls off the radar of public protest” (Roberts, 2022, p. 22).

In “Terror,” Roberts draws on harrowing real-life stories to illuminate how families suffer devastation at the hands of CPS. The critical reality is that “Black and Indigenous families are the most likely to be disrupted by child welfare authorities. ... Family policing is most intense in communities that exist at the intersection of structural racism and poverty” (Roberts, 2022, p. 36). The resulting CPS-induced trauma on Black children and their families is toxic and life-altering—especially significant as Black children “comprise a percentage of the foster care population that is nearly double their share of the overall population” (Roberts, 2022, p. 39). Consequently, the trauma inflicted by these encounters has long-term effects on mental health, brain development, and family stability that disproportionately impact Black and Brown children, families, and communities. Impacted children eventually display signs of fear and anxiety, loss of familial/ancestral cultural and ethnic identity, and loss of respect for biological parents as they increasingly become convinced that parents can’t protect them—and no one cares. In many respects, impacted individuals can see CPS’s benevolent terror as legally sanctioned and legitimized “professional kidnapping”. Roberts critiques this reality by highlighting the stark contrast in how affluent white families are given privacy and grace—including opportunities to solve their issues privately—while poor Black families are scrutinized and penalized by CPS and their fellow law enforcement colleagues. The disparity, she notes, is not incidental; it is systemic.

Ultimately, all families should have the same chances and resources that affluent white families have. A key point made by Roberts (2022) is that “it isn’t enough to argue that Black children are in greater need of help. We should be asking why the government addresses their needs in such a violent way” (p. 46). Such administrative violence is socially inequitable, unjust, and inhumane. It reflects how Black, Brown, Indigenous, and other marginalized communities are viewed, valued, and included—or excluded—within civil society and democratic institutions. It also reveals how those in power continue the legacy of dehumanization rooted in chattel slavery and re-entrenched through Jim Crow-era laws, policies, and prevailing social norms that upheld white supremacy and enforced racial and social stratification. This legacy remains embedded in many aspects of social life—including the child welfare system—by defining worthiness, vulnerability, and parental legitimacy—concerns Roberts further interrogates in the next section.

Design and Profit in the System

In “Design,” Roberts explores how the system is structured to surveil and punish rather than support families. She connects CPS’ methods to a long history of racial domination—from slavery to post-Civil War apprenticeships, to the forced removal of Native American children. While familial and community needs vary, “what ties together the families involved in the child welfare system is that they are disenfranchised by some aspect of political inequality—whether race, gender, class, disability, or immigration status—and typically embody an intersection of these subordinated positions” (Roberts, 2022, p. 87). In one especially damning example of hegemonic domination and oppression, Roberts discusses how pre-signed removal orders are kept on file to expedite child separation outside of court hours, revealing a system that prioritizes efficiency over due process or empathy.

In many ways, the benevolent terror of CPS involvement in Black families is the new modern-day slavery. Marginalized groups are always on CPS radar, while affluent communities are not. This modern-day slavery allows control over Black families and diminishes the chances of generational identity, prosperity, and growth in Black communities. Roberts documents how the U.S. government has always found ways to police Black children and families—beginning with slavery and selling/separating children, then forced apprenticeships of Black children after the Civil War, and weaponizing Native American children. In this section of *Torn Apart*, readers will confront at least two key questions: 1) Why are Black Americans considered incapable of governing themselves? Are Black mothers viewed as dangerous reproducers? 2) Is the child welfare system really designed to keeping families intact, and is CPS doing enough to keep children in their homes and limiting removal, or is the child welfare system incentivized to tear families apart and place children in foster care?

Roberts also introduced the concept of the “Foster-Industrial Complex”—a network of state agencies, private contractors, and nonprofits that profit from the separation of families. Policing poor people allows state agencies to profit from the separation of families with billions of dollars funneled through federal, state, and local governments to care for children under the auspices of CPS. The industrial complex expertly creates an endless loop that funnels families back into the system with endless requirements—many unrelated to the stated reasons for child removal—while allowing CPS and its agents to continue securing federal funding and funding through fees imposed on families. This critique raises key questions for nonprofit agencies that receive contracts or grants tied to family separation and compliance.

The Carceral Web and Complicity

In “The Carceral Web,” Roberts’ shifts focus to surveillance and punishment showing how Black families are not just occasionally policed—they are embedded in systems of constant scrutiny. The incorporation of routine and systemic intense surveillance in Black communities introduces and essentially creates the Carceral Web—the prison-like web of incarceration, surveillance, and control through various social institutions and in almost all aspects of life—including the most private and intimate ones. Think about this: to catch a criminal, law enforcement usually studies their suspect. Knowing their plans, watching them discreetly, and knowing just when to intervene. In extreme measures, they even go undercover to build relationships with their suspect. Roberts

(2022) describes similar activities in child welfare services highlighting tactics, such as deputized neighbors, newborn drug screenings, and algorithmic surveillance that profile families before any harm has occurred. She illuminates the provocative nature of the relationship between child welfare services (through CPS) and law enforcement and how the lines between child welfare and criminal justice are routinely blurred—by design. While there may be legitimate reasons for law enforcement to be present in some child welfare checks/visits, readers will be compelled to question why police are routinely present—as law enforcement officers—for social service—child welfare—visits. Readers will also have to confront the blurring of the lines between being a social services worker (CPS worker) and functioning as a law enforcement officer.

The routine presence of law enforcement officers—and their “commanding presence” taking precedence over that of the social worker can turn deadly for Black families. Even reports of domestic violence can result in a child being removed from their mothers instead of removing an abuser from the home. So, rather than helping a mother in need, Roberts highlights how mothers are often blamed for domestic violence—labeled as neglectful for being victims. In this logic, the system doesn’t remove abusers, it removes children. Roberts goes on to demonstrate how foster care becomes a pipeline to incarceration, with children aging out into homelessness, criminalization, and despair. While wards of states, children—especially Black and Brown children—in many cases are set up for failure, not rescuing. Their trajectories result in higher rates of suicidal ideation, breaks and delays in education, instability, and estrangement. The evidence presented shows that these children are seen as undeserving of compassion and more likely to end up in lockdown facilities, treatment centers, or prison. These children are punished for running away after being sexually assaulted in foster care and all too frequently, runaway children are arrested and are likely to be sent to jail. The result—runaways in the foster care are on a pipeline from foster care to prison.

Abolition as a Path Forward

In “Abolition,” Roberts presents the visionary and radical idea of dismantling the child welfare system and replacing it with community-based care rooted in dignity, mutual aid, and kinship. “Abolition” may seem radical, but ask yourselves, as we did, “How can you be more radical than snatching children from their homes?” The system is designed so that preventive services are surveillance. System key stakeholders—the real ones—not the children and their families—don’t seem to see a need for change as they earn profits—in the billions—from “caring” for children through the child welfare system—or as demonstrated through disempowering black communities under the guise of “care.” Rather than policing families, Roberts envisions investment in mental health care, housing, food security, and especially kinship care—a long-standing tradition in Black communities where extended family members step in to support one another. She uplifts grassroots initiatives and informal care networks as models for what a caring, abolitionist future could look like. Abolition, as Roberts defines it, is not about destruction for its own sake; it is a blueprint for building a better world.

Implications for Nonprofit Education and Leadership

The foster care and adoption systems in the United States are broken and fractured, inundated with equity concerns including widespread concerns about racial dispro-

portionality, the over-surveillance of poor families, and systemic instability that leaves many children worse off (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022; Wellington, 2024). Nonprofit organizations are not only key providers of foster care services—often operating under government contracts—but they also shape the philosophy and implementation of child welfare itself (Wellington, 2024; The Policy Circle, n.d.). With foster care systems nearly privatized in many states, and many states contracting foster care and adoption services, nonprofit service providers become frontline managers of children’s lives and welfare outcomes (The Policy Circle, n.d.). Functioning in dual roles—both as compassionate actors and institutional agents—demands that nonprofit leadership education center ethical complexity, historical awareness, mindfulness, systemic critique, social equity, and social justice (see Berila, 2016; Capper, 2019; Chordiya & Sabbharwal, 2024; Guy, 2025; Irizarry, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2023; Mason et al., 2020; McCandless & Gooden, 2024).

Torn Apart presents a critical moral challenge to public service broadly—and the nonprofit sector in particular. Many child welfare nonprofits participate in or are shaped by the same systems condemned in *Torn Apart*. Nonprofits that implement mandated reporting, partner with CPS, or receive government contracts may unwittingly reinforce the very harms they seek to mitigate. As nonprofit scholars and practitioners begin to further explore the “mechanisms that encourage or enable [nonprofit] unethical behaviors,” it behooves us to recognize the impacts of the nongovernmental organization (NGO) or more broadly the nonprofit halo effect where moral goodness is insufficient to avoid unethical and immoral activities, particularly examining this halo effect and mechanisms such as moral justification, moral superiority, and moral naiveté (de Bruin Cardoso et al., 2023, p. 590). *Torn Apart* provides crucial insights beneficial to nonprofit and public service education and leadership professionals. At the same time, abolitionist nonprofits and mutual aid groups offer blueprints for alternative care models. Perhaps they can foster enhanced holistic approaches for organizational listening and diverse and inclusive stakeholder engagement instead of just stakeholder management (see Fu et al., 2023).

Future nonprofit leaders must be equipped not only to manage programs but to interrogate and reimagine the systems they inhabit, ensuring that their practices align with principles of democracy, justice, dignity, and community empowerment (see Callahan, 2025; Dettlaff, 2023; Evans et al., 2023; Guy & McCandless, 2025; Hogan & Sathy, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2025; Johnson & Meyer, 2022). As Mary Guy (2025) recently noted, “all levels of government, along with the nonprofits we rely on to deliver services, are brimming with specialized talent in every conceivable field” and “what is needed are graduates well-schooled in the constitutional premises, intersectoral dependencies, and administrative challenges that fit together like pieces in a puzzle” (pp. 1-2). *Torn Apart* is an informative and instructive read in this regard.

We believe *Torn Apart* should be required reading in nonprofit leadership programs and all programs where child welfare and human services are addressed. Its implications resonate across multiple domains: ethics, governance, stewardship, funding, and accountability. We must ensure that public service and nonprofit education programs train future leaders to resist complicity, center community voice, and champion social equity and social justice. As recently noted by ASPA’s Section on Democracy and Social Justice, “it is beholden upon all in civil society to play an active, influential role

in guiding the direction and spurring momentum for real change to occur. ... We must set a bold agenda for justice, civic trust, and public accountability” (Irizarry, 2025, p. 103).

Conclusion: A Call to Reimagine and Rebuild

Dorothy Roberts’ *Torn Apart* is a landmark work that forces us to confront the painful realities of family separation not as an accidental byproduct of a flawed system, but as the very function of a system rooted in racialized control (See also Dettlaff, 2023). For public servants, nonprofit leaders, educators, and advocates, the question is not whether the system can be reformed, but whether we have the courage to imagine something different. We can start by shifting focus from growing the foster-industrial complex and enriching the stakeholders at the expense of our children and communities, and focus on abolishing family policing and building stronger, better, and resourceful families, communities, and public service systems. We can work to shrink the system until it no longer needs to exist. We can pivot funding from failed activities and reallocate those millions in investments to support communities needing resources—to support our children, and disadvantaged families. Strategic reallocation can remove our dependence on and need for family policing. We would no longer need to routinely see our children and families torn apart. As presented by Roberts (2022), this is abolition as care, as creation, as justice. In an era where families continue to be torn apart—in Black communities, at international borders, and across colonial histories—Roberts (2022) reminds us that justice requires more than reform. It demands transformation.

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