

Editorial

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Introduction to the Special Issue

Confronting Systems of Care and Harm


Advancing Nonprofit Education, Leadership, and Praxis in Foster Care and Adoption


The *Journal of Nonprofit Education and Leadership* (JNEL) has long advanced the study and practice of ethical, evidence-based, and engaged leadership. With this special themed issue on foster care and adoption, we invite readers to confront one of the most complex, ethically fraught, and consequential arenas where nonprofit organizations operate: the systems of child welfare and family regulation.

Across the United States and internationally, nonprofit organizations play pivotal roles in the delivery, management, and advocacy of foster care and adoption services—often in tandem with, or contracted by, government entities. This relationship has a substantial impact on the children in the United States because in 2023 alone, 343,077 children were in foster care (AFCARS, n.d.). Yet as contributors to this issue make clear, these roles are not neutral, nor without deep moral responsibility. The work of fostering and adopting children is saturated with histories of colonialism, racialized surveillance, and carceral logics, as recent abolitionist scholars such as Dorothy Roberts (2022) and Alan Dettlaff (2023) compellingly demonstrate.

This issue emerges at a time when movements for abolition, family preservation, and community-based care are gaining momentum (i.e., Thriving Families, Safer Children and their national initiative to keep children and families together and strengthen family well-being over family separation policies [Anne E. Casey Foundation, 2025])—and when the traditional narrative of foster care as a system designed to “save children” must be critically interrogated. The emergence of this special issue also occurs as we are seeing an influx in, greater need for, and appreciation of critical perspectives (i.e., Benson, 2022; Eikenberry et al., 2025; Meyer & Moore, 2025; Mirabella et al., 2024; Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2024; Wright et al., 2022) that emphasize multiple identities and perspectives (Blessett & Meyer, 2025; Colvin & Meyer, 2025; Companion & Rivera, 2026; Evans, 2026b; Galego, 2026; Irizarry et al., 2026; Meyer 2023; Meyer & Benenson, 2023; Roodra, 2015) in multiple sectors and in-

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dustries (Bharath et al., 2024; Evans, 2026a, Meyer, 2025; Settles & Buchanan, 2024), public service education and training (Gottlieb & Eikenberry, 2025; Irizarry, 2022; Irizarry et al., 2024; Mirabella & Nguyen, 2019; Mirabella et al., 2023; Philips, 2024), and civic engagement, social justice, and social equity more broadly (Berry-James et al., 2021; Blessett, 2018; Irizarry, 2026; Irizarry et al., 2025; Meyer et al., 2024a, 2024b; Williams & Duckett, 2020).

The relationship between and among the nonprofit sector, government entities, and private sector contractors providing child welfare and family regulation services needs to be more prominently prioritized and addressed in the fields of public administration and nonprofit studies, which to date has historically underresearched these relationships and implications. This is imminently required, given the number of families being targeted by arbitrary, cruel, and inhumane federal administrative procedures that without due process are separating families, resulting in American children of documented and undocumented immigrants, many of whom haven't violated the law, being left alone in the United States (potentially in foster care or thrown into the adoption systems), or forced to be deported with their parents (National Immigration Project, 2025; Santana, 2024), reminiscent of previous policy eras, but this time on steroids. For instance, in 2011, it was reported that there were 5,100 foster children in care due to the detention and/or deportation of their parent(s), and at the time an additional 15,000 children were expected to enter care for the same reasons over the next five years (Gavett, 2011; Jackson, 2011; Johnson, 2017). While more updated data on the number of children that would enter the foster care system due to parental detention and/or deportation seem to be unavailable, a recent report by the Brookings Institution and Center for Migration Studies estimates that due to more aggressive enforcement of immigration laws, "about 66,000 children would enter the foster care system, at an annual cost to taxpayers exceeding \$400 million" (Lisiecki et al., 2025). Analysis of US laws and policies at the immigration-deportation-family separation nexus have even noted how US immigration and deportation policies may constitute crimes against humanity when undertaken as a systematic attack or widespread massive and frequent targeting of specific civilian populations identified by distinguishing features, nationality, or ethnicity (Frye, 2020, pp. 368–370).

We must move beyond the idea that child welfare is about saving children from their families. The spirit of "child welfare" should be about ensuring that families never have to be separated to begin with. That is not just a vision for a better foster care system—it is a call for a better world, in which the nonprofit sector plays a critical role.

Centering a Nonprofit Lens

Throughout the world, and particularly in the United States' decentralized child welfare system, nonprofit organizations play a critical role in almost all aspects of the child welfare system (Appleton, 2005; Boswell, 1998). In many states, the primary contracted providers of services like foster care and adoption are nonprofit organizations. For example, in New York State, nonprofit organizations provide care for more than 80% of the children and youth in foster care (Joint Legislative Budget Hearing on Human Services, 2025). In this ecosystem, nonprofits serve as case managers, service providers, educational institutions, legal advocates, and sometimes even residential care providers. They operate within power-laden funding streams, contractual relationships with the state, and intersectoral networks that shape outcomes for children and families. Yet nonprofit studies, public administration, and social equity scholarship have often under-examined the roles and responsibilities of these organizations in sustaining or challenging systemic inequities.

Through this special issue, we challenge scholars in the fields of nonprofit studies and public administration to recognize their crucial role in undertaking research on and developing critical program, procedural, and policy responses to issues regarding the administration of foster care and adoption. Within this process, we challenge the fields to question our theoretical frameworks to understand if and how they apply to the current lived experiences of those within the child welfare system. This special themed issue is meant to serve as a clarion call for this neglected yet quite critical area of administration. To begin addressing the disciplinary neglect of child welfare and the role of nonprofits in policy and service delivery, we encouraged potential contributors to address the following questions in our call for papers:

- How do nonprofits both mitigate and perpetuate harm?
- What ethical dilemmas do nonprofit leaders face when operating within family-regulation systems?
- How can intersectional, abolitionist, and community-centered approaches inform more just and equitable nonprofit practices?
- How can nonprofit education and leadership development better prepare justice-centered public servants to engage critically with foster care and adoption systems?
- What pedagogical frameworks and practices can support transformative learning around equity, abolition, and ethical care within nonprofit and public service education?

While we were unable to answer all of these questions within one special issue, we continue to use these questions to guide us beyond one special issue and towards a more comprehensive literature around foster care and adoption.

An Invitation and a Charge

This special issue is intentionally diverse and interdisciplinary in form, including peer-reviewed articles (DeMasters et al., 2025; Nelson et al., 2025) autoethnographies that provide analytical perspectives on child welfare and adoption (Berry-James, 2026; Irizarry, 2025; Kurtz, 2025; Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025; Ruiz, 2025), and book reviews of landmark abolitionist texts (Allen & Irizarry, 2025; Sweeting, 2025). It centers scholars with lived experience, practitioners, and academic voices across disciplines such as nonprofit management, social work, public administration, sociology, and education. Our hope is that this special issue serves as both a resource and a provocation—an invitation to nonprofit leaders and educators to reflect on their own positionality within systems of care and control. Through this complex web, we challenge academics and practitioners to:

- Move beyond charity frameworks toward solidarity-centered support
- Center family preservation and community healing
- Advocate for policy change and abolitionist alternatives where necessary
- Acknowledge and interrupt complicity in systems of harm
- Develop new pedagogies to prepare justice-centered public servants and nonprofit leaders
- Elevate the issues and opportunities in the child welfare system and help advance efforts to truly pursue the best interest of the child—as these children are among our most vulnerable.

Among those most profoundly failed by current systems of care are LGBTQ+ youth, youth with disabilities, and those living at the intersections of poverty and marginalization. LGBTQ+ youth comprise as many as 30% of youth in the system compared to just 11.2% of youth outside of it (Baams et al., 2019; Children’s Rights, n.d.; Kidsave International, 2025; Lawyers For Children, 2025; The Trevor Project, 2021). According to All Children–All Families (n.d.), approximately one in three children in foster care identify as LGBTQ+. Almost half of LGBTQ+ youth (44%) reported entering care as a direct result of their identities, with close to two thirds of transgender youth experiencing family rejection (Children’s Rights, n.d.). Once in care, these youth continue to face disproportionate harm, ranging from placement disruptions and verbal and physical abuse to exclusion from affirming placements and exposure to placements that lack basic protections (Armstrong, 2024; Human Rights Campaign, n.d.; McCormick, 2018; The Trevor Project, 2021). These experiences are linked to elevated rates of homelessness, survival-based behaviors, and mental health crises, perhaps explaining why nearly 40% of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ+ (Children’s Rights, n.d., p. 1; Kidsave International, 2025). Additionally, the LGBTQ+ community at large suffers disproportionately in terms of starting families given the challenges the community faces pertaining to having and raising children either biologically, through foster care and adoption, and/or assistive reproductive technologies (Naylor, 2018), as well as through additional adversities placed for those with non-heterosexual-sex-based gender identities, especially gender nonconforming and transgender individuals to be who they are in all aspects of life, including in access and equity to health care, employment, and social services (Bharath et al., 2024).

Youth with disabilities face similarly dire outcomes. Estimates suggest that between 22% to 33% of children in foster care have a physical, emotional, and/or cognitive disability, yet foster care systems routinely fail to identify, accommodate, and/or support these needs, and the needs of those caring for them (Children’s Rights, 2006; Platt & Gephart, 2022). Studies have found that children living with disabilities within the child welfare system in the US are more likely to be abused and neglected, with anywhere between 22% to 70% being maltreated (Lightfoot et al., 2011, p. 2070). Children living with disabilities consistently experience higher rates of abuse in the child welfare system than those without disabilities, though prevalence varies by type of maltreatment such as physical abuse (2.1 to 3.79 times more likely) and sexual abuse (1.8 to 3.14 times more likely) (Lightfoot et al., 2011, p. 2070) with some reports indicating that those with intellectual disabilities are seven times more likely to be abused (Shapiro, 2018). Dion et al. (2018) reported similar findings in Canada noting that children living with intellectual disabilities were found to “experience more severe maltreatment and were more often referred to ongoing child protection services” (p. 175). Youth with disabilities experience significantly more placement disruptions and spend longer periods in care, often nearly twice as long as those without disability. This may be due to the lack of access to the specialized services and stable placements necessary for well-being and development for these youth (Platt & Gephart, 2022).

Poverty remains a powerful driver of family separation and child welfare involvement (Dettlaff, 2023; Kidsave International, 2025; Roberts, 2022). Rather than focus on the best interest of the child, helping families in need, and keeping families together, the child welfare system fails miserably by “respond[ing] to circumstances of poverty with punishment—charging families with neglect, investigating them without consideration of extenuating circumstances, removing children from their parents, and in some cases, arresting the parent instead of providing concrete, responsive support” (ACLU, 2023, p. 3). State-level variations exist. For example, states with more stringent or higher requirements to substan-

tiate claims of child abuse and neglect lead to fewer children being removed from the home while states with more restrictive welfare state systems lead to more child placements in foster care (Raz & Sankaran, 2019, p. 1530).

Families of color, particularly Black, Indigenous, and Latino communities, are more likely to be surveilled, criminalized, and separated under the guise of neglect—a term too often used as shorthand for poverty (Dettlaff, 2023; Roberts, 2022). Poverty is systematically synonymously used for child neglect, as “... research now suggests that simply being a member of a marginalized community may be used as a litmus test for determining if maltreatment occurred, or if parenting approaches were unacceptable” (Yang & Ortega, 2016, pp. 517–518). Kidsave International (2025) highlights these inequities starkly: Black youth account for 22% of those in foster care but only 14% of the U.S. child population; Latino children comprise 23% of youth awaiting adoption but only 20% of those adopted; and Indigenous children are overrepresented at a rate of 2.6 times greater than their proportion in the population.

Given the overrepresentation of minority children in the child welfare system and the limited placements with culturally and racially representative placements, more attention is needed on transcultural foster care placements, a problem not unique to the U.S. but also found in other countries such as Canada (Daniel, 2011), likely due to the unique histories and legacies of racism and colonial constructions of these populations (Benson, 2022; Roxburgh & Sinclair, 2023). Legislative efforts alone may be insufficient to address this problem as research has shown how The Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) passed in 1978 failed at achieving its two primary goals: a) placing indigenous children in tribal home placements or with relatives, and b) placing indigenous children with “same-race/ethnicity caretakers” when compared to non-American Indian children (Francis et al., 2023, p. 527). While the issue of who has rights in this regard continues to be litigated, the most recent ruling by the supreme court upheld the ICWA in *Haaland v. Brackeen* (Frederick & Ditzenberger, 2023) ruling that Native children should not be unjustly separated from their families and protect against the erasure of Tribal identity, culture, and sovereignty. The unique issues that come from transcultural and transracial placement adds additional complexity to the trauma that children experience and the understanding of family structure (e.g., Roodra, 2015).

Foster youth have also been found to continue to suffer disproportionately once out of care and transitioning to adulthood with some studies reporting that foster youth have “... higher rates of homelessness, less housing stability, poorer neighborhood quality, and more reliance on public housing” (Berzin et al., 2011, p. 2119). This may contribute to the continuation of the cyclical nature of engagement with child welfare systems, or generational foster care. Increasingly children are removed from their homes due to unstable housing with 25,000 removed for housing-related circumstances in 2019, again demonstrating the punitive instead of the supportive response of the system to the crime of poverty of families in need (ACLU, 2023, p. 3). Adding insult to injury, few also know that in many instances, led by efforts at the state level (where child welfare systems are managed), the federal government is essentially reimbursed by billing parents who forcibly had their families separated for child welfare services. For example, a parent in Louisiana was reported owing “\$78,843 for foster care” services and parents in “six states that shared data with NPR—Florida, Idaho, Louisiana, North Dakota, Washington, and Wyoming” owing \$68 million in total in 2019 (Shapiro et al., 2021). This charge for the families continues the cycle of poverty instead of helping create a situation where families have the financial resources to care for their children.

Taken together, these data reveal a system that not only fails to protect but actively reproduces harm. The way the child welfare systems works, especially in tandem with other systems such as law enforcement and immigration in relation to family separation perpetuates violence to children and families, particularly in terms of mental and emotional distress (Naseh et al., 2024). Nonprofit leaders, educators, and public administrators must move beyond acknowledging disparities to interrogating and transforming the systems that create and sustain them. This involves confronting and weighing the long-lasting harm to children and families caused by the stated and intended goals of the child welfare system in light of the actual and moral failings of practices and their impacts (Raz & Sankaran, 2019). The harms caused and failings of the system don't just go away once family reunification occurs (where possible) or when a child ages out of foster care. These harms and failings perpetuate a cycle of injustice, harm, and social inequity on children and young adults long after their time in care and long into adulthood (Munson et al., 2011).

Several scholars have proposed a way forward for public administration. For example, Rebecca Padot (2014) advanced frameworks grounded in public administration that better contextualize foster care's complexity. Naylor (2021) explored social equity and LGBTQ rights with emphasis on foster care, adoption, and assisted reproductive technology. That said, far more research and dialogue is needed. It is not enough to seek inclusion within broken structures. We must center abolitionist, trauma-informed, and equity-driven care that affirms the dignity and full humanity of every child.

Themes Across This Special Themed Issue on Foster Care and Adoption

The articles, autoethnographies, and book reviews in this issue reflect a rich range of critical and interdisciplinary perspectives, aligning with themes originally outlined in the call and expanded through the thoughtful work of our contributors.

Several contributions take abolitionist and critical race approaches, exposing how foster care functions as a carceral institution disproportionately targeting Black, Brown, and Indigenous families (Allen & Irizarry, 2025; Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry, 2025; Ruiz, 2025; Sweeting, 2025). These pieces interrogate the limitations of reform and uplift visions of community-based care, mutual aid, and family preservation.

To start this special issue, DeMasters et al. (2025) explored the administrative burden experienced by parents within the foster care system. Using a three-round Delphi-study, DeMasters et al. (2025) found that there were three kinds of costs in the foster care system that inhibit reunification: compliance costs, learning costs, and psychological costs. These costs led to parents seeing the foster care system as punitive. To combat this administrative burden, nonprofits should audit the burden put on parents within the system, implement more trauma-informed care, and help parents understand their rights.

Secondly, Nelson et al. (2025) used qualitative research to explore the impact of openness on 25 Americans who were adopted through private adoption. Using a 2x2 matrix of communicative openness and structural openness, she identified four groups in her study: Open Group, Mixed Openness Group, Closed Group, and Reunion Group. The authors found the importance of openness on the adoptee's sense of self. Family situations with more openness allowed adoptees to explore the fact that their family was different more directly. Based on this research, Nelson et al. (2025) recommend that professionals help prepare families for openness in adoption, including training and education on what openness in adoption looks like.

Unique to this special issue, we offer six autoethnographic pieces from academics and professionals who have diverse experiences within the fields of adoption and foster care. These pieces show the humanity of foster care and adoption. It reminds us that when we discuss foster care and adoption, it is not just about theory and politics; there are real people involved in the policies and procedures that we research and the organizations we support. Through this special issue, we emphasize the human experience and encourage researchers and practitioners to use this perspective as a jumping off point when discussing foster care and adoption. Table 1 provides an overview of the six autoethnographic pieces.

Table 1

Autoethnographies

Author	Title	Brief Description
Irizarry, J.I. (2025)	Reimagining Nonprofit Praxis in Foster Care: Through Lived Experience and Radical Hope	Through the framework of radical hope, Irizarry (2025) presents his experience as a youth in foster care to identify how nonprofit organizations can help those in foster care thrive. This process is supported through trauma-informed care, policy focused on family healing, and representative leadership.
Ruiz, R. (2025)	From the Frontlines: A Personal and Professional Reflexive Analysis of the U.S. Foster Care System	Ruiz (2025) uses his experience as both a child within the foster care system and a social worker to analyze how the system creates harm, especially for children of color. His call to action finds that nonprofits, educators, and policymakers are perpetuating harm on those in the foster care system and proposes a call to action to focus on healing, equity, and family preservation.
Berry-James, R.M. (2025)	No Place Like Home: An Autoethnographic Journey of Resilience and Foster Care	Berry-James (2025) uses her own experiences of both being abducted and being in foster care to explore the history of foster care and advocate for empathy, family supports, community healing, and solidarity.
Meyer, S.J. (2025)	Private Adoption and Nonprofit Studies: An Autoethnographic Perspective	Meyer (2025) is able to use his experience to discuss his journey as an adoptive parent. Through his journey, Meyer discusses the complex ethical issues around private adoption and proposes a way for nonprofit studies to join the discussions of nonprofit adoptions.
Kurtz, L. (2025)	My Journey Through Child Welfare: From Sister to System Reformer	By looking at her experiences growing up with many foster care siblings to working in the foster care system, Kurtz (2025) makes recommendations on how nonprofit studies can better support those working in foster care with their research.
Mirabella, R. (2025)	From System Budgets to Lived Bonds: Reimagining Nonprofit Education Through an Autoethnographic Journey in Three Acts of Care	Using her experience as both an adoptive parent and a professional within the field of foster care, Mirabella (2025) digs into her extensive professional history to explore how budgets in foster care can be used to support children and families instead of harming them.

Throughout, contributors confront not only historical legacies (e.g., orphanage systems, Indigenous family separation, racial capitalism) but also contemporary challenges:

- Aging out and transitions to adulthood
- Privatization and nonprofit accountability
- Permanency planning and ethical dilemmas in adoption
- The psychology and sociology of family dynamics across foster, adoptive, and biological relationships

Overall, a key takeaway from this special themed issue is articulated by Raz and Sankaran (2019), when they asserted that “we can make clear that foster care must be a tool of last resort, reserved for the most serious cases of child maltreatment in which there is imminent risk of harm to a child” (p. 1530).

As guest editors, we are humbled by the courage, scholarship, and lived experience embodied in this collection. The topics, themes, and questions explored in the contributions to this special themed issue are, as Williams and Duckett (2020) have noted elsewhere, “salient ones, especially when reflecting upon the past practices of administrative evil and administrative racism and their present-day implications embedded within the politically charged and polarizing environment that impacts both policy and practice” (p. 1041). In curating this issue, we sought to help the disciplines of public and nonprofit administration confront supposed systems of care that often result in harm to children and families while providing initial steps needed to advance public service and nonprofit education, leadership, and praxis in our child welfare systems. We do this by amplifying critical analyses of current foster care and adoption systems, while also illuminating pathways toward community-based, preventative, permanency, equity-driven, and abolitionist alternatives.

Closing Remarks

In shaping this issue, we recognized that the themes identified above cannot be fully understood without also considering the personal and professional standpoints from which we engage this work. As editors, we therefore turn to our own lived experiences and interpretive approaches to ground the scholarship in the human realities it seeks to address. Contemporary interpretive research approaches are increasingly prioritizing and valuing the lived experience of individuals as valid contributions to sensemaking and knowledge generation such as autoethnographic approaches (Chang, 2007; Cooper & Lilyea, 2022; Stahlke Wall, 2016; Wall, 2006). Consistent with such approaches, we offer autoethnographies (Berry-James, 2025; Irizarry, 2025; Kurtz, 2025; Meyer, 2025; Mirabella, 2025; Ruiz, 2025) to highlight how personal experience can enhance our understanding and facilitate innovative, unique, and applicable contributions to social science in ways that address “a gap in traditional research where the researcher’s own voice is typically not overtly included as part of the research” (Cooper & Lilyea, 2021, p. 198), and that is inter- and cross-disciplinary, challenges the old ways of doing things, and promotes innovation to address the challenges of today and tomorrow (Meyer & Elias, 2023; Mirabella et al., 2025).

Our analytical autoethnographies ground our shared vision for this special themed issue on foster care and adoption in the specificity of our own lived, professional, and scholarly experiences. Each co-editor reflects on their positionality, the personal stakes they carry into this work, and their hopes for the future of child welfare, public administration, and nonprofit practice in the foster care and adoption arena. These autoethnographic contributions call for an informed and intentional approach to social equity and social justice at the

nexus between child welfare systems and the nonprofit sector in ways that disrupt the status quo and ignite reflexivity and innovation (see Blessett, 2018; Wright et al., 2022). They bring in the “lived experiences and ‘street knowledge’” (Philips, 2025, p. 176) acquired to help inform and reshape the discourse, theory, policy, instruction, and praxis of modern-day child welfare and public service education and practice. This is consistent with informing future practices and how we train and develop the next generation of public servants through self-reflection, sensemaking, and ways of communicating and practicing our craft in nonprofit education programs (Evans et al., 2022; Gottlieb & Eikenberry, 2025; Irizarry et al., 2024), social work PhD programs (Hudson et al., 2017), and public service programs more generally (Irizarry, 2022; McDonald et al., 2024; Stewart et al., 2025).

We invite you to read these autoethnographies not only as introductions, but as calls to action—starting points for deeper inquiry, accountability, and transformation in the spirit of the recognition that “what gets written influences what gets read, taught, cited, and pursued for further research” (Evans, 2023). Together, these contributions elucidate the multidisciplinary and intersectional nature of foster care and adoption, and the urgent need for public servants—particularly, nonprofit educators, practitioners, and leaders—to engage with humility, accountability, and a commitment to social justice.

It is our hope in creating this special issue to begin much needed conversations around these issues and others. Each of the editors of this special issue have been connected to foster care and adoption issues through some aspect of their personal and professional lives, as clients (those in care and their families, and potential caregivers), caregivers (foster families, guardians, adoptive parents, and many others), program administrators, social workers, and scholars. It is our determined belief that discussion of these issues in the public administration and nonprofit arena is long overdue. The administration of foster care and adoption services for children, youth and families, including both policy and organizational perspectives, demands urgent attention by all of us. We hope that the contributions of this special themed issue on foster care and adoption will spark necessary conversations in classrooms, nonprofit organizations, public agencies, and policy spaces—and that they will inspire continued work toward equity, justice, and abolitionist futures in child welfare and beyond.

Co-editing this issue is an act of reclamation. The stories curated and included in this special issue are not only evidence of trauma or archives of harm, but blueprints of resistance, fulfillment, and transformation. May this special issue on foster care and adoption challenge us to build systems not just of survival, but of love, justice, and radical possibility that truly centers the brilliance of the youth we claim to serve.

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