

No Place Like Home

An Autoethnographic Journey of Resilience and Foster Care

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Abstract

This manuscript delves into the lived experiences of a child who was kidnapped and taken across the border, ultimately being placed in foster care upon her return to the United States. Employing an autoethnographic approach, the author weaves personal reflections with broader societal themes, exploring the psychological, social, and emotional impacts of these traumatic experiences on youth and the administration of the child welfare system. The narrative underscores the pressing need to bolster the social safety net, ensuring that out-of-home placements in foster care are readily available when necessary. The author's journey is characterized by resilience as she navigates the complexities of entering and exiting foster care after the trauma of kidnapping. This manuscript serves not only as a testament to survival but also as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and communities, particularly considering the rising incidence of international child abductions.

Keywords: *Child trauma, family abduction, foster care, Hague Convention*

"It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men." – Frederick Douglass

Introduction

Like the children who experience international parental child abductions, my journey has been shaped by trauma and resilience. By sharing my personal story of kidnapping, I aim to highlight the urgent need to strengthen the social safety net for children who enter, live in, and exit the foster care system. This manuscript reflects my deeply held personal connections to these issues and my unwavering professional commitment to promoting equitable and just approaches that improve the life chances

of children in foster care. We must advocate for reforms that not only protect vulnerable children and ensure their well-being but also encourage the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families to rethink child welfare practices. It is essential to enhance child and family services, improve intake and assessment approaches to reduce response times for investigations, bolster family preservation services, and effectively address the diverse needs of children to enhance their overall well-being.

Historical and Contemporary Causes of Foster Care Placement: 1970 to Today

In 1970, approximately 500,000 children were in foster care in the United States. This number reflects the social and economic conditions of the time, as well as the functioning of the child welfare system (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1999). Several factors contributed to these placements, with abuse and neglect—including physical, emotional, and sexual abuse—being a major reason (Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2000). Parental substance abuse also played a significant role, as addiction often hindered caregivers' ability to provide stable homes (National Institute on Drug Abuse, 2020).

Economic hardship was another critical issue; many families faced poverty and unemployment, making it difficult for parents to care for their children adequately (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2016). Additionally, parental illness or disability—whether physical or mental—further complicated caregivers' abilities to meet their children's needs (Kirk & Griffith, 2009). Family disruptions, such as divorce, separation, or the death of a parent, often lead to children entering foster care (Murray & Hagan, 2010). Social and environmental factors contribute to out-of-home placements in the foster care system. Less than half of children exiting foster care were reunified with their families, raising concerns for those aging out without permanent homes. The foster care system has experienced a decline in the number of children in care, yet Black and American Indian/Alaska Native children disproportionately make up the foster care population (Children's Defense Fund, 2021). Furthermore, the persistent challenges posed by COVID-19 have intensified familial stressors, thereby increasing the risk of maltreatment and complicating access to essential support services (Rodriguez et al., 2021; U.S. Health and Human Services, 1997). Understanding this complex interplay of factors is crucial for comprehending the challenges faced by families during that era and today. These reasons often intersected and intensified the challenges faced by families and children during the foster care placement. To provide a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing foster care placement over time, Table 1 presents a comparison of reasons identified in 1970 with those identified today.

Table 1*Factors Influencing Foster Care Placement Over Time*

Reason	1970s	Today
Abuse and Neglect	Significant factor; physical and emotional abuse common	Continues to be a primary reason; includes a broader understanding of neglect
Substance Abuse	Less recognized but present; growing issue	Major factor, especially with the opioid crisis
Mental Health Issues	Less awareness and support for parental mental health	Increased recognition; mental health issues are a significant concern
Domestic Violence	Less frequently cited as a reason	A critical factor; more awareness and resources available
Economic Hardship	Present but less emphasized	Major contributor; economic instability impacts many families
Family Disruption	Common due to divorce and separation	Still prevalent; compounded by social changes and instability
Homelessness	Less documented; often underreported	Recognized as a significant factor affecting many families

In recent decades, awareness of critical issues like substance abuse and mental health has significantly increased, revealing the complex societal factors contributing to family crises today, such as economic instability, domestic violence, and systemic inequities (Daley, 2013; Kirkbride et al., 2024; Tzouvara et al., 2023). This understanding has led to a greater emphasis on developing support systems that assist families in crisis, recognizing that modern reasons for children entering foster care are often linked to broader societal challenges. By prioritizing the well-being of both children and families, we can rethink and reimagine compassionate child welfare policies. Effective foster care and family preservation services not only protect vulnerable children from abuse and neglect but also empower families, helping them heal and thrive together.

Cross-Border Abductions and the Struggle for Reunification

In the annual report on international child abduction, Marco Rubio, United States Secretary of State, emphasizes that the Department of State under the Office of Children's Issues in the Bureau of Consular Affairs serves as the U.S. Central Authority for the Hague Convention of 25 October 1980 on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction and acts as a regulatory framework for resolving cases of international parental child abduction (U.S. Department of State, 2025). Between the United States and foreign governments, a treaty partnership exists to “restore the strength and safety of children and parents harmed by international parental child abductions, so that they may thrive” (U.S. Department of State, 2025, p. 4). An international parental child abduction is described as an event “when a child is removed from or retained outside their country of habitual residence, and the removal or retention violates another parent or guardian’s custody rights” (U.S. Department of State, 2025, p. 4). The U.S. Department of State (2025) reports there were more than 1,000 children abducted from the United States. Of the 808 active abduction cases, 91.5% involved a custodial parent or guardian seeking the return of their children, and 8.5% represented a parent or guardian seeking access to the children. Specifically, in 2024, 1,118 children were “abducted or retained outside of the United States” (U.S. Department of State, 2025, p. 9).

Treaty partnerships between the United States and foreign nations show considerable variation in compliance and effectiveness when solving cases involving international parental child abduction. For instance, the Convention, a treaty partnership between the United States and Canada, has been in place since 1988. Despite this long-standing relationship, there were still 46 children possibly involved in international abductions with Canada last year, which represented 30 new cases in 2024 and active investigations on 16 cases, which were continuing from the previous year (U.S. Department of State, 2025).

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI, n.d.), criminal and civil procedures that guide responses during international parental kidnapping cases are straightforward. Following a child abduction, field officers can assist families in two main ways:

1. A criminal arrest warrant can be issued for a parent or guardian who takes a juvenile under 16 outside of the United States without the other custodial parent’s permission, as outlined in the International Parental Kidnapping Crime Act of 1993.
2. In countries that have signed the Hague Convention, a civil process exists that facilitates the return of abducted children under 16 to their home countries, as detailed in the Hague Convention on the Civil Aspects of International Child Abduction (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d., para. 10).

Family abductions represent the most common type of missing children cases. The Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [ICPSR] (n.d.) indicates that the National Incidence Studies of Missing, Abducted, Runaway, and Thrownaway Children (NISMART) regularly collects data to estimate the number of missing children, as mandated by the 1984 Missing Children’s Assistance Act (Pub.L. 98-473). While capturing the full scope of missing children in a single study is challenging, NISMART provides valuable insights. For instance, NISMART-1 (1988) defined the

main types of missing child episodes, while NISMART-2 (1989) established standardized definitions and unified estimates of missing children in the U.S. NISMART-3 (2011) focused on three groups—general public, law enforcement, and juvenile detention centers—addressing issues related to missing children. NISMART-4 (2019) offered data on kidnapped and missing children, particularly those involved in stranger kidnappings.

Reports indicate a growing issue of missing children, underscoring the need for a global strategy (Ferrara et al., 2024). Family abductions have risen dramatically, increasing from 60,000 in the 1970s compared to an untold proportion of the 359,094 children reported missing in 2022 (National Child Identification Program, n.d.). When children are abducted by family members or strangers, the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) aims to “identify, locate, and recover child victims” (U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). However, my own experience reveals the complexities involved in an overburdened foster care system. Upon returning to my home country, my rights as a child and my urgent need were disregarded, reflecting the psycholegal challenges faced by children abducted across international borders (Patel et al., 2021). I was placed in the foster care system while the judicial system deliberated on whether I could return to my grandmother and guardian, further delaying my reunion with my family.

No Place Like Home

I remember that day vividly—when the only family that I knew changed forever. My mother handed me her infant and said, “Rajade, take care of my baby.” Moments later, she literally walked out the door and was never seen again for several years.

As the second oldest of five children under the age of 10, I, like my siblings, developed a resilience shaped by our shared experiences. Throughout our lives, we navigated trauma, consciously or unconsciously adopting various roles to cope with what we faced. We became heroes, rescuers, caretakers, and sous chefs, always looking out for one another. I can almost recall the dull gray sky that hung low over Bradley Beach, New Jersey, mirroring the heaviness in my heart and the whirlwind of excitement in my mind. At just seven years old, I stood in the doorway of one of the two homes I remember, feeling the weight of our circumstances, yet also a flicker of hope for what lay ahead.

After years of running away, only to be returned to the dwelling that was unfit for our small family of five and other visitors, I felt a glimmer of hope for a new beginning—a chance to forget the childhood trauma. Each of us took on roles typical of children coping with trauma. My older sister, at age 9, became the rescuer, always intervening or protecting during traumatic incidents. My brother, just 5, avoided social interactions, displaying heightened anxiety when engaging with adults. My youngest brother, only three, bore signs of physical abuse that went unspoken. As the protector, the baby cradled in my arms was forever shielded from harm.

My grandmother, who would soon become our legal guardian, stopped by the house that Friday evening on her way to her beach home to say hello and check on us kids. She will never forget the day she became the guardian of five children, all under the age of 10. The situation was straightforward—my mother no longer wanted to be a mother. She simply said goodbye, walked out of the house, and left the United States. For two years, we were told that she could not be found and was likely deceased. During

those early years, our grandmother, a public servant, struggled to keep our family together, eventually placing the youngest three in foster care. St. Peter Claver Catholic Church became the focal point in our lives; we gathered there each week for Mass, religious classes, baptisms, and confirmations. As we moved inland, we settled into temporary homes. Fortunately, my older sister and I were school-age and remained in the custody of my grandmother, while our younger siblings—three under five—were placed in the care of a loving couple who were seen as grandparents and became important caregivers (Berry, 2023).

In the summer of 1974, at the age of 9, I stood on the porch looking down the end of the long driveway leading to our small cottage, surprised to see a familiar figure confidently approaching the front door. Without hesitation, I dashed inside to inform my grandmother that our mother was still alive! The following weeks blurred together as family members visited and children were reunited with her. Like many children who endure the trauma of abandonment and the shock of reemergence, I felt a profound reluctance to leave her side. Instead of attending summer camp with my sister, I was permitted to stay home to keep my mother company. On this day, she asked me a simple question: “Have you ever been on a bus before?” When I replied no, we went to the bus station and she took me on the longest bus ride of my life—out of our small New Jersey beach town and across the border into Montreal, Canada.

For almost a year, I lived in a state of fear under my mother’s care—scared yet clinging to the hope of reuniting with my family someday. In a cramped apartment complex in the borough of Lachine, we slept on the cold floor, surrounded by emptiness—no furniture, telephone, or television. I attended school, carrying the heavy burden of my secret, feeling isolated from my peers. Every day, I begged to call my grandmother, yearning to ease her worries about my sudden and mysterious disappearance. Each night, I cried out for my siblings, mourning the life that I had shared with my brothers, sisters, aunts, uncles, and church family. Every holiday that passed reinforced my sense of loss and longing. Ultimately, I managed to persuade my mother to take me back home across the border into the United States. It was the inquisitive border agents who, noticing my Canadian accent and questioning me about my school and birthplace, uncovered my truth. At that moment, the reality of my family abduction hit me hard: I had been kidnapped and missing for the entire school year. The stark contrast between my former life and my grim existence during that time underscored the horrors that I had endured.

Along with my mother, I was transferred across the border back to the United States. Upon our return to New Jersey, she was arrested, and I was abandoned once more. Despite my desperate pleas to go home to my grandmother, I was interned into the foster care system. In the middle of that night, I was processed, assigned a social worker, and scheduled for medical examinations. My unrelenting demands for immediate family reunification were denied, all under the guise of treatment for the shock and trauma I had endured during captivity. The caseworker focused on building a legal case against my mother, while I felt invisible and unheard. I spent isolated weeks in foster care, separated from the only place I knew as home. Once again, I was a captive, facing compounded isolation, and my cries to reconnect with my sibling and maternal grandmother were dismissed. My perspective as a child highlights the profound need for the foster care system to listen and prioritize the voices of children in their care,

ensuring that a child's emotional needs and family connections are not overlooked. Facilitating crucial conversations and creating space for voices to be heard is essential to leading by convening; this paradigm shift emphasizes social justice by integrating mindfulness practices to support the lived experiences of those who have faced trauma.

Leading by Convening: A Paradigm Shift

Reflecting on nearly four decades of teaching, research, praxis, and public service, I have prioritized social equity and social justice. As a champion for social equity, I am committed to opening doors and creating opportunities for the next generation, ensuring that all voices are heard and valued. My unwavering commitment to public service leads me to assert that fostering social equity is a moral imperative, crucial for enhancing societal well-being. This requires developing inclusive policies that address systemic inequalities and ensure equitable outcomes for all communities (Simms et al., 2020). In higher education, I draw upon my own lived experiences to enhance discussions of fairness and justice, particularly at the intersection of ring theory and social equity. This article details a personal crisis and its profound effects, not only on me and my family but also on my teaching, research, and service. By reflecting on this experience, I aim to demonstrate how such challenges have shaped my understanding of my role and responsibilities within the academic community.

In the context of helping others, ring theory effectively illustrates how a child at the center of a trauma is surrounded by interconnected circles of support (Muntz, 2022). Armstrong (n.d.) explores the application of ring theory to understand grief and social justice. This framework highlights the significance of community and relationships in the healing process (Brindle, 2020; Silk & Goldman, 2013). The innermost rings typically include immediate family members and friends, while the outer circles encompass the broader community, including first responders, medical professionals, and bystanders (Brindle, 2020). Silk and Goldman (2013) emphasize how trauma survivors perceive their experiences, providing invaluable insights for those who assist them. Their principle of “comfort in, dump out” stresses the importance of offering emotional support to trauma survivors while encouraging others to process their feelings in a way that respects boundaries, fostering a healthier environment for all involved (Silk & Goldman, 2013, para. 11). In the fields of public policy, public affairs, and public administration, my scholarly contributions have engaged both local and global communities to describe, explore, and explain the complexities of ring theory. This theory examines the crises of lived experiences and the reactions of those closest to individuals experiencing grief or trauma, all framed within the broader context of support and boundaries in communities and systems.

As a child abducted by a non-custodial family member, I found myself at the center of a complex circle of support, with each ring playing a distinct role. My family, situated closest to me, exemplified the comfort in principle; I longed for reunification to receive the emotional support essential for my healing. In contrast, my interactions with the outer circles, particularly the foster care system, underscored the challenges of external support, where well-meaning responses often felt overwhelming—especially as I yearned to be returned to my family after the traumatic event. This experience not only illustrates the dynamics of ring theory but also emphasizes the crucial importance of respecting boundaries and understanding relationships in creating a fair and just safety net within public administration.

For those who have experienced childhood trauma, we grow into adults who reflect on our lived experiences by recognizing the importance of research and scholarly activity. From securing external grants to receiving early career awards, our contributions to high-profile journals and influential books showcase our commitment to advancing knowledge. Through community engagement, we connect with those around us, seeking to address societal challenges and foster positive change. In higher education, our personal commitment to fairness and justice shines through our scholarship on teaching and learning, innovative classroom practices, and experiential learning opportunities. As a distinguished scholar, my academic honors, professional fellowships, and membership in the National Academy of Public Administration empower me to advocate for fair and just approaches that prioritize the voices and needs of our most vulnerable populations in public administration. Building on this foundation, I have spent over a decade conducting evaluation research, assessing programs that support food-insecure children under the age of 5, women and children living in public housing, adolescents in early stages of addiction, and individuals living with HIV/AIDS who are struggling to maintain their sobriety.

Over the years, my scholarly activity began as a focus on implementing affirmative action in higher education and continues to support policies, programs, practices, and perspectives that advance social equity (Berry, 1999). As a scholar, I continue to examine how trauma profoundly affects the most vulnerable populations by highlighting urgent needs to promote the fair and just distribution of publicly funded programs and services (Gooden et al., 2023; Irizarry et al., 2025). In the public sector, research and community engagement underscore how systemic inequities exacerbate trauma, particularly among marginalized groups (Irizarry et al., 2025). Further analysis illuminates the pressing challenges faced by communities striving for fairness and justice (Wright et al., 2022). In this context, mentorship emerges as a critical mechanism to center voices and choices in the academy that foster resilience and empowerment (Ortega et al., 2012; Ortega et al., 2013). To build a more equitable society, it is essential to address the persistent and consistent gaps identified in recent studies (Berry-James et al., 2021; Gooden et al., 2023). By examining the intersections of race and policy, we can better understand factors that enhance program efficacy and provide institutional support for those most affected by trauma (Berry-James et al., 2021). Ultimately, the collective insights from this body of work advocate for a transformative approach in public service education that prioritizes the needs and voices of the most vulnerable, ensuring that our efforts to address disparities lead to meaningful change and societal rebirth (McDonald et al., 2024).

A significant contribution to this area is *RAMS in Research: A Guided Journey through the McNair Scholars Summer Program*, co-authored with my student mentee, Cindy Vigil (2025). This article examines the impact of mentoring relationships on first-generation college students, emphasizing how effective mentorship fosters student success by enhancing trust, belonging, and self-efficacy, using the McNair Summer Research Program as a case study. Additionally, my co-authored article, *Threats to Democracy: A Danger to Social Justice for All* (Irizarry, et al., 2025), discusses how democratic backsliding undermines social justice efforts and proposes a multilevel response framework to promote democratic resilience. My contributions to understanding racial disparities and teaching about social justice are further reflected in several other publications, including the *Psychosocial Dimensions of Health, Homelessness, and*

Diverse Families (Nwagpuda et al., 2024), *Civil Rights, Social Equity and Census 2020* (Berry-James et al., 2020) and most prominently in *Stepping Up to the Plate: Making Social Equity a Priority in Public Administration's Troubled Times* (Berry-James et al., 2021).

As a university professor, I embrace the African proverb, “She who learns, teaches,” as a guiding principle in my work. I focus on fostering innovation in the classroom and creating experiential learning opportunities for underrepresented students in a field dedicated to inclusivity, critical thinking, and civic engagement. I have developed award-winning courses that explore the intersectionality of race, gender, and public policy, emphasizing the importance of diversity in higher education. Additionally, my co-authored book, *Why Research Methods Matter: Essential Skills for Decision-Making*, with Susan T. Gooden (2018) underscores the importance of teaching research skills in public service education.

My professional service to the academic community includes roles such as senior associate dean at Virginia Commonwealth University and active participation in the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA), Network for Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), and American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). As a co-founder of the *Journal of Social Equity and Public Administration*, I worked collaboratively to advance scholarship on social justice issues. Furthermore, I have contributed to various editorial boards and have served as a mentor to numerous graduate students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, helping to promote diversity within academia. My awards in the field are a reminder of the child in the circle and the hope that lives in the outer rings.

The recognition I have received throughout my career reflects not only individual achievement but also the collective hope of those we serve, particularly the children at the center of the trauma circle. My scholarly activities have gained acknowledgement from the outer rings of my traumatic childhood, illustrating how good work can resonate outward, impacting lives beyond immediate trauma. Being elected as a Fellow of the Congressionally chartered National Academy of Public Administration in 2019, receiving the ASPA Chester A. Newland Citation of Merit Award in 2024 and the Rutgers University—Newark Distinguished Alumni Award in 2023, along with other honors such as the NASPAA Social Justice Curriculum Award in 2017, the ASPA Presidential Merit Citation in 2017, Sylvester Murray Distinguished Mentor Award in 2017 from the Conference on Minority Public Administrators, and the NC State University Chancellor’s Creating Community Award, Outstanding Faculty from North Carolina State University in 2013, affirms the national recognition of my efforts. Each accolade serves as a testament to the support and collaboration from those in the outer rings, who amplify our shared mission.

At the 2025 NASPAA global conference, I received the Nadia Rubaii Distinguished Service Award, which underscores my commitment to achieving social equity and highlights the critical role of mentorship in nurturing future leaders. As the immediate past-president of NASPAA, I organized the international conference, *Leading by Convening: Shaping the Future of Public Policy, Public Affairs, and Public Administration*, setting a foundation for advocating equity in the public sphere. The 2024 NASPAA conference emphasized the strength that emerges when diverse minds unite to address changes, share insights, and cultivate innovative solutions. For the

child that lives within my inner circle, each accolade is a reminder of the promise that our work holds, inspiring a new generation to pursue fairness and justice in their communities. As I continue to strive for excellence, I remain dedicated to addressing the needs of the most vulnerable, ensuring that their voices are heard, and supporting them on their journeys. My awards and recognition in this field serve as a testament to the child in the center—the embodiment of dreams—and the hope that radiates outward, inspiring future generations.

Sharing my lived experience after my abduction serves not only as a narrative of resilience but also reflects my commitment to safeguarding the welfare of vulnerable children. Additionally, this manuscript acts as a call to action for policymakers, practitioners, and communities. By showcasing a successful reunification, I hope to inspire others in similar situations and continue to promote systemic improvements in public service. It is essential to emphasize the need for change within America's safety net for our most vulnerable populations.

Reflections

The phrase “there is no place like home” highlights the importance of investing in children's well-being from the very beginning. As Frederick Douglass wisely stated, “It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men” (Goodreads, n.d.; Mapp & Gabel, 2019). This reinforces the critical importance of proactive support for children, demonstrating that investing in their development is far more effective than attempting to address the issues stemming from inadequate early intervention policies and programs. By strengthening the social safety net, we can create a foundation for resilient children who are less likely to face trauma and hardship. Protecting children is not only a more effective strategy but also a kinder approach than dealing with the consequences of inadequate support. Policymakers, practitioners, and communities must work together to create a strong foundation for our children, reducing their risk of trauma. Through collective effort and action, we can strive for a brighter future for all children. This autoethnography shares the personal journey of a child affected by kidnapping and foster care, serving as a powerful advocacy tool that promotes empathy and understanding among policymakers.

Reflecting on the process of writing this manuscript, I recognize the urgent need to move beyond traditional charity models in favor of solidarity-focused approaches to prioritize family preservation and community healing. Meaningful change arises from empowering those directly affected by these issues. As I advocate for policy reforms and examine alternatives to the current system, I also acknowledge my role in perpetuating harmful structures. The development of innovative educational strategies is crucial for equipping public servants and nonprofit leaders to effectively address the challenges within the child welfare system. This assertion is strongly supported by a range of research (Berry-James et al., 2021; Irizarry, 2022, 2026a, 2026b; Irizarry et al., 2023; McDonald et al., 2024; Meyer et al., 2022; Mirabella et al., 2025; Stewart et al., 2025), highlighting the importance of informed practices and policies in this critical area. Ultimately, our goal must be to prioritize the best interests of our most vulnerable population—our children.

In the spirit of the Sankofa bird, I look back at my younger self to reassure her that everything will be okay. This autoethnographic exploration highlights the critical in-

tersection of personal experience and broader societal issues, particularly through ring theory. From my current perspective, I embrace the Ubuntu principle: I am because we are. Together, we share the responsibility to nurture our inner child, drawing on the wisdom of our lived experiences and protecting them in everything that we do, both locally and globally. Let us extend our compassion and commitment to help children everywhere, as they are our future, deserving of love, support, and the opportunity to thrive. Public and nonprofit organizations play a vital role in this mission, as they can provide the resources and advocacy needed to strengthen the safety net for children. Together, we can create a world where every child feels valued and safe, where their dreams can take flight. By strengthening the safety net for children, we uplift not only their lives but also the fabric of our society. Let us unite in this mission, recognizing that when we support our children, we elevate humanity itself.

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