

Public Abstract

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Title:The (In)visibility of Race, Class, and Gender: Workers' Standpoints on the Transformation of Missouri's Child Welfare Policy

Many people assume that the child welfare system is merely a benevolent institution that protects innocent children from harm. The child welfare system does protect some children, but, in the process, it also restructures and polices families as it casts a wider and wider net. It is important to understand the tradeoffs families face in exchange for resources and to understand the state's shifting role and commitment to providing services to families. This ethnographic study examines Missouri's child welfare policy to understand how it is organized around gender, race, and class assumptions. I look at everyday practices to show how social inequality is produced and reproduced by subjecting families to intense regulation and disruption. I explore the ways the differing standpoints of social workers, mandated reporters, and juvenile officers are based in their positions in the system, and I explore the tensions that develop among them around protecting children and preserving families. By focusing on Missouri House Bill 1453, I also show that the intentions of legislators were transformed in practice at the local level. I discuss the development of a discourse of liability that encouraged social workers to recommend that even more children be taken into protective custody even while it encouraged juvenile officers to do the opposite. After discussing policy recommendations, I argue that it is in our national interests to care for families and not just for children, despite the fact that many people are more concerned with protecting children from poor single mothers.