

# A Family-First Approach to Child Welfare in New York State



## The Promise

Children thrive when their families can easily access economic and concrete supports from trusted resources in their neighborhood—even when their parents have low incomes.

## The Challenge

Every year, thousands of families experience intervention by New York’s child welfare system. Despite federal and state policy progress, nearly 100,000 families a year experience unnecessary, invasive, and unfounded investigations. Many families are reported to the child welfare system because of symptoms of poverty, including food, income, and housing insecurity. A child welfare case causes families tremendous and lasting stress and upheaval, often compounding the trauma of living in poverty. When intervention leads to the separation of a child from their family, the impacts are drastic and lasting. If the child does not reunite with their parents or build a loving, permanent relationship with another adult, they “age out” of foster care as early as 18 years old without a family to fall back on. At each stage of a child protection investigation, Black and Latino children are multiple times overrepresented compared to their white counterparts, disparities that are the result of decades of systemic racism and ongoing discrimination.<sup>1</sup>

## What We Know

Reports to the Statewide Central Register are overwhelmingly unfounded, leading to unnecessary stress on children and families (2023)



Source: New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2024). 2023 Monitoring and Analysis Profiles With Selected Trend Data: 2019-2023 New York State.

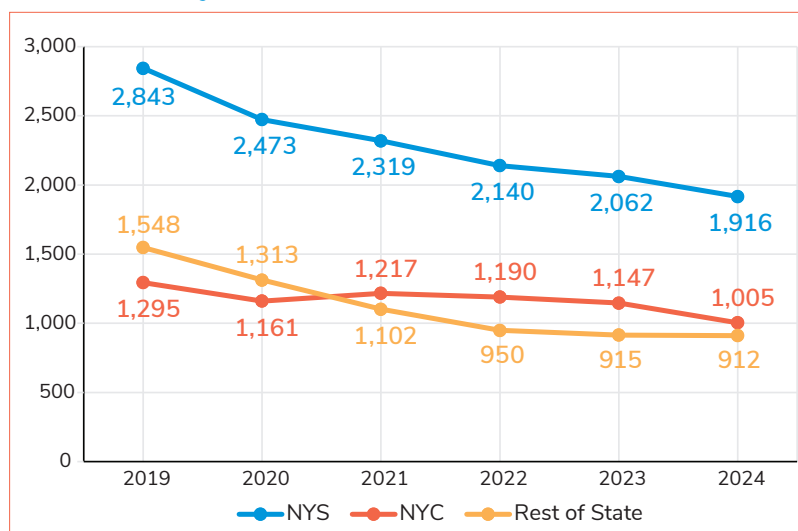
When a county receives a report of suspected child abuse or neglect from the Statewide Central Register, they are required to start an investigation.

Child Protective Services investigations last as long as two months, and often involve searching the home, interviewing family members and everyone they know, and strip searching the children—often without notifying the family of their rights, such as their right to be informed of the allegations, or their right to consult an attorney.<sup>2</sup> If Child Protective Services removes a child from their home, they often place the child in a congregate setting, which includes group homes and institutions.

**While New York has made progress reducing the number of children in congregate care, it still places a significantly greater percentage of children separated from their families in congregate care than most other states.** In New York in 2023, 12% of children removed from their families to foster care were placed in institutional settings (referred to as congregate care or group homes),<sup>3</sup> significantly higher than the national rate of 9%.<sup>4</sup> In states with the lowest percentage of placements in congregate care, children are placed with families at higher percentages.<sup>5</sup>

Separating a child from their family can bring extraordinary tumult to a child’s life, the impacts of which can be worsened by placing the child in an institutional setting. An institutional placement increases the chances of children suffering long-term detriments—including decreased ability or inability to attach to caregivers, slowed physical growth, delayed cognitive and language development, and behavioral issues.<sup>6</sup> This is especially true of children under the age of 13, who numbered almost 300 in New York’s congregate settings as of 2024.<sup>7</sup> When it is necessary to separate a child from their family, they have better outcomes when placed with relatives or adults who know them well.

New York has reduced the number of children in congregate care over time, a change largely driven by the counties outside of New York City



Source: Schuyler Center calculations based on NYS OCFS. (2024).

## The Policy Solutions

The following community-driven solutions can help children in neighborhoods impacted by New York’s child welfare system:

- ▶ Invest in community-based programs and services that contribute to child and family wellbeing.
- ▶ Prevent unnecessary calls to the State Central Register by ending anonymous reporting, among other strategies.
- ▶ Ensure families know their rights when they first come into contact with the child welfare system.
- ▶ Ensure pregnant people and new mothers provide informed consent before they or their babies are drug tested.
- ▶ Ensure that each child in foster care is placed in a setting that will best facilitate their health, wellbeing, and success.

“

They just set me up to be a statistic, kind of dumped me here and left me here to figure it out. And time is ticking.”

—Young person who experienced congregate care, excerpt from the *Are You Listening?* report (January 2023)

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<sup>1</sup> New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2024). [Disproportionate Minority Representation Packet 2023 Dashboard](#).  
<sup>2</sup> Advisory Committee to the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (2024). [Examining the New York Child Welfare System and Its Impact on Black Children and Families](#).  
<sup>3</sup> New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2024). [2023 Monitoring and Analysis Profiles With Selected Trend Data: 2018-2022 New York State](#).  
<sup>4</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center. (2023). [Children in Foster Care by Placement Type in United States](#).  
<sup>5</sup> The Annie E. Casey Foundation KIDS COUNT Data Center. (2023). [Children in Foster Care By Placement Type in United States: Foster Family Home – Relative](#).  
<sup>6</sup> Mitchell, M. (2023). [“To Be Ripped Away From Your Family”: Acknowledging and Addressing the Impact of Loss, Grief, and Relational Connection for Youth in Foster Care](#). Family Justice Journal, Summer 2023, 14-18.  
<sup>7</sup> New York State Office of Children and Family Services. (2024). [Children in Care and Custody \(All Statuses\) by Setting Type: 2024 Q2](#).

\*For all sources and computations, go to <https://scaany.org/sonyc-sources-2025/>