

FORMER YOUTH IN CARE: KINSHIP CARE AND ITS POTENTIAL IMPACT ON BLACK
FAMILIES & CULTURAL IDENTITY IN THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

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ABSTRACT

In 2016, the Ontario Human Rights Commission (OHRC) launched a public inquiry to determine whether or not there was a disproportionate number of racialized populations representing the child welfare system. Data collected from the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (2015) showed that while African Canadians make up 8.5% of the Torontonians population, they made up 40.8% of the children and youth in the child welfare system. This alarming information called for changes in the ways Black children and youth have been impacted and what changes could be made with policy. This research study intends to highlight policies that have been implemented in response to over-represented communities in the child welfare system with a particular focus on kinship care and how it is incorporated into policy that seeks to improve the treatment and service for Black families in the Greater Toronto Area.

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Since 1875, the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto has been keeping children and youth safe, strengthening families and providing alternate care for children and youth who are unable to remain in their home” (Toronto Children’s Aid Society, 2020). One of the ongoing concerns in the African, Black and Caribbean community is just that. What is the Society’s understanding and rationale behind keeping children and youth safe while strengthening families? Under the banner of protection, many Black children and youth have been removed from their families and placed in foster care or group homes where they are exposed to trauma, isolation and a plethora of other harms (Maynard, 2017). As of April 2020, there are 50 children’s aid societies across Ontario, including 12 Indigenous child welfare organizations (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2020). Each Children’s Aid Society (CAS) in Ontario is an independent, non-profit organization run by a board of directors elected from the local community, or a First Nation operating under the Indian Act (MCCSS, 2020). The Child, Youth and Family Services Act (CYFSA) came into effect on April 30, 2018 with a focus on enriching the wellbeing of children and youth. The changes made to the former Child and Family Service Act were necessary changes that service users and communities alike had been calling for, citing dated language and a lack of representation displayed in the policies. These changes piqued my interest because of my work and practicum experience in the field of child welfare. With a desire to see children and families strengthened, I understand that there are circumstances including situations I have been a part of where the best solution at the time is for the child to be cared for elsewhere because of what the parents might be going through at the time. Getting a glimpse of the different roles at the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto allowed me to understand the processes that take place from the initial stage of inquiry through to a family investigation.

My motivation behind this research is to gain a better understanding of what is being done in the lives of Black, African and Caribbean families who have had to endure historical, generational trauma and harm at the hands of the Children's Aid Society. I will be specifically focusing on the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. When a Toronto Star article in 2016 entitled, 'CAS study reveals stark racial disparities for blacks, aboriginals' was published, I had just begun working in the field. When I stumbled across this article, the numbers gripped me. The numbers stated that 8% of people under 18 in Toronto were Black yet 42% of children in care of Children's Aid Society of Toronto in 2013 were Black or had one Black parent (Fallon et al., 2013). The study also found that Black children were 13 per cent more likely to be taken from their homes and placed with foster parents or in group homes. The primary objective of the Ontario Incidence Study of Reported Child Abuse and Neglect was to provide reliable estimate of the scope and characteristics of child abuse and neglect investigated by child welfare services in Ontario (Fallon et al., 2013). This report revealed a lot of troubling information. Another notable statistic was that the estimates presented in the 2013 report were based on information collected from child protection workers on a representative sample of 5,265 child protection investigations conducted across Ontario during a 3-month period (Fallon et al., 2013). I became invested in this area upon coming to understand that this information was now public. I also believe that this exposure is a sliver of the real issue. The CAS was not collecting race-based data, something proponents had been pushing for some time. It was through the push to collect race-based data that the disproportionality in the child welfare system finally became evident. It was with this data that there were shifts in CAS approaches and strategies to begin to work against this once covert attack on racialized communities.

In this Major Research Paper, I outline the experience of Black youth who have been in care to argue that kinship care is a possible model that has the ability to strengthen the lives of Black youth in Toronto's child welfare system. This research paper includes primary research pieces where individuals that were once in the child welfare system provide insight into their experiences from their entry to exit as well as how it has impacted their lives. Primary research also is based on responses from service providers within the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and how they are tackling anti-Black racism in the child welfare system. A glimpse into strengthening African, Black and Caribbean communities is looked into and steps the CAS is taking to address anti-Black racism from within the workplace is explored. Kinship care as a focus in the research. Further research shows the changes that have been made to policies that directly impact Black children and families and how the changes are meant to impact Black children and families for the better. This research serves as a guide to display how policies that have been revised and updated are being practiced for the purpose of seeing if they are on track with the plans they have set forward.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

In light of data exposing the disproportionate over representation of black children in care, I am interested in exploring what is being done in agencies like the Children's Aid Society of Toronto to reunify children within their families and culture. It is important to recognize that practice in the area of kinship care is a possibility and is fairly new in Ontario, Canada. Brisebois (2013) points out that in Ontario "it was not until 2006, that child welfare agencies became mandated, upon removal of a child from their home, to explore potential placements with a relative, a member of the child's extended family or a member of the child's community (pg. 290)." In this literature review, a definition of kinship care is given; I discuss the overrepresentation of Black families in child welfare and I discuss the advantages and disadvantages of kinship care.

Under various circumstances, a child in their home may need to be removed from their home and placed in another environment. This can consist of being placed in residential care or with other families, including foster families (Winokur et al, 2014). Kinship care provides children the opportunity to live in a familiar environment with a family related to the child, similar to the ones they were in before having to transition and as such, maintain pathways that include but are not limited to children's cultural and religious and communal ties (Strijker et. al., 2003). Stepparents, godparents, friends, teachers, coaches and neighbours are all viable options as the relationship is not always indicative of a biological connection but also a significant social connection (Turner, 2016). Kinship care can be a private arrangement between family members and with the presence of a child welfare agency involved, kinship care can be a court-ordered arrangement (Paxman, 2006). Kinship care resembles the belief that not only do children belong

with their biological family, it is also that the family is the best establishment for children to thrive (Paxman, 2006).

Overrepresentation of Black families

There is an issue when it comes to the treatment of Black families in the child welfare system in Canada, Pon, Gosine and Phillips (2011) argue that the disproportionality of African-Americans involved with child welfare services is linked to African-American children being at higher risk for needing child protection services. The disproportionality of Black, African and Caribbean children is not exclusive to the United States of America. There has been an ongoing issue in the child welfare system in Ontario for some time and it is an issue that has been plaguing the system and that is the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system. Why are so many children involved in the system in the first place? How is it that when Black children and families enter the child welfare system, their chances of thriving end up worse? What is being done to nurture the family unit once children are apprehended? What is being done to address anti-Black racism in the child welfare system and foster family resiliency in the Black community? Roberts (2002) states that given the grossly disproportionate removal of Black children from their families when compared to the general population, it is necessary to understand the child welfare system as a site of racist state violence against Black families and against Black communities more largely.

From the beginning of its inception, child welfare agencies in Canada have done their share of monitoring racialized groups and dislocating their family unit that originated under slavery (Maynard, 2017). Established in 1981, the Toronto Children's Aid Society was equipped with the Children's Protection Act two years later that allowed for the removal of children from their homes and as such, provisions exist to immediately apprehend the child (Regehr et al.,

2016). As Maynard (2017) goes on to state, child welfare agencies across Ontario are granted enormous powers to control, monitor and divide Black families, sending children into state institutions or foster care. With stereotypes of Black mothers characterized as angry or aggressive, unable to take care of their children, a precedent is set that makes it impossible for Black mothers to be perceived as anything other than incompetent (Maynard, 2017; Katshunga et al., 2020). With this perception of the Black mother in mind and an idea of how children should be raised, it is not surprising that over-reporting and over-representation of Black youth in the system persists (Maynard, 2017). With a large demographic of workers that do not reflect the community or culture being served, this might also explain reproducing discourses that continue to oppress Black families (Pon et al., 2011; Maynard, 2017).

A number of quantitative studies point to the overrepresentation of Black children in care. When examining Lu's article (2004) entitled, "Race, ethnicity and case outcomes in child protective services," there is a clear understanding that African American children are overrepresented in the child welfare system compared to every other minority. With that being said, the data is unable to determine why this is the issue. Limited information with respect to how the people in this group are being impacted might suggest that the overrepresentation of African American families in the system may not be an entirely negative perception of African American families. In fact, the overrepresentation of African American families in the system in comparison to the underrepresentation of other minority populations may speak to the cultural inadequate support for other minority populations (Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-Macleod, Newton, Ganger, & Johnson (2004). Furthermore, while it is clear that an overwhelming number of African American children are placed out of their homes, the impact that has on families cannot be gathered. Lu's (2004) study focusses on gaining knowledge of the predictability of service

outcomes depending on race but it does not address why particular groups might face such outcomes in the United States of America. It does create a space to ask more questions.

Kinship Care

Several studies, including Ryan (2000), Scourfield (2003), Strega et al. (2008) argue that there is a gendered discourse in child protection ignoring men and holding the mothers accountable for both the care of children and the fathers' potentially harmful effects on the children. With a focus on working with a family to improve their situation while isolating a key figure in the family dynamic is setting them up for failure with little hope of restoration. Furthermore, this discourse which ignores men fails to recognize that men can contribute with resources rather than just being the economic support which can be of great benefit to the family involved (Storhaug & Øien, 2011). This, coupled with the perception that predominantly single Black mothers are to blame for the outcomes of their children entering the system leaves very little hope of success (Pon, Gosine and Phillips, 2011). According to Roberts (2002), placing large numbers of children in state custody interferes with these critical functions served by families. The breakdown of the family is the first step that leaves lasting damage to children as they interact with other institutions as they age. It depletes a community's social capital, weakening the group's ability to form productive connections among its members and with people and institutions outside the community (Roberts, 2002). Black children who are separated from their parents and find themselves in care do not receive the same support when in care, are often left to their own devices and it is not long before they are moved from one institution to another (Roberts, 2002). Pon, Gosine and Phillips (2014) acknowledge the roles of white and non-white bodies within child welfare agencies, perpetuating white supremacy and anti-racism while also recognizing that it is also language and representation. Disassociating children from

their culture and uprooting their identity is nothing short of genocide as they assimilate to the dominate culture society practices. A notable theme across the literature on child welfare was the overrepresentation of marginalized groups (Curry et al., 2017). The overrepresentation of Black children in care, As Lu, Landsverk, Ellis-Macleod, Newton, Ganger, & Johnson (2004) mention, result in greater likelihoods of being placed out of their homes with reunification becoming less of a reality. What would stop service providers from implementing a model like kinship care? The idea of pushing a particular standard across the agency might be a factor into the decisions made that have been keeping Black children separate from families that reflect their culture. It is the extended family, not the nuclear family that is the foundation of the family in African Caribbean or West Indian communities (Barrow, 1996). Transnational parenting for example is a practice where guardians who have young children but need to migrate to other countries have their children taken care of by extended family members until they are reunited. (Best, 2014). Throughout this informal kinship process, contact and relationship are maintained while apart from one another and it is only because of the broad network of extended family members considered which allows for this practice to work.

In much of the research, there was little doubt that kinship care, while fairly new in practice continues to be a step in the right direction for families, especially children (Hayduk, 2017). With my involvement in child welfare, I am aware of agencies moving towards a model that seeks to cut out placements (group homes, foster care) if it means situating a child in the care of extended family members in the event that a child needs to be removed from their current household. There are many questions that arise as agencies within Ontario transition from placing children in their care to essentially placing them back into the care of their families and communities.

Findings that came from conversations with caregivers, youth and caseworkers point out that kinship providers lack many necessary services not only for their children but for themselves. Caseworkers that were interviewed mentioned the potential benefits of keeping children with their families, however concerns were raised because the caregivers adopting this role seemed ill prepared to carry on the task (Brisebois, 2013). In some cases, this spoke to the lack of support available to the caregivers. Furthermore, the interaction and role parents of origin play in the kinship process is key to its success. Lopez (2013) found that parent's cooperation or lack thereof played a significant role in terms of reunification outcomes. Hines (2007) notes that characteristics where reunification has a decreased likelihood of being achieved are families with serious social and economic factors. Coupled with Cudjoe's (2019) research, it uncovers the strain kinship care puts on families out of their cultural obligation to step in and parent. There is a need for agencies to step in and provide better support to caregivers. There is also a need to speak to caregiver's responses to facilitate the reunification process. It is no secret that caregivers are feeling the brunt of raising children and from the voices that have been able to speak, it is remarkable to see what they have been doing voluntarily in many cases. What are the agency's roles after they have placed a child or youth in kinship care and furthermore, what is being done on their part to reunify children to their biological parents if it is in the best interest of the child?

Dill's (2012) research gathers information on kinship care outside of the foster care paradigm. Dill took on this approach grounded in social construction and grounded theory, moving beyond description and generating or discovering a theory for a process or action (Creswell, 2013). These paradigms tied into resilience and attachment theories allowed for the researcher to prepare questions for three separate groups of people involved in the process to

provide their experiences in kinship care. This research study was quite interesting because it allowed parties to share their experiences in kinship care. What this approach allows for agencies and policy in general are insights into the people they are seeking to reach but might not otherwise hear because research on the other end does not provide a microphone. With the findings laid out and analyzed, overarching themes can then be examined amongst parties as well as the limitations they might face. When looking at the contrast between these two different approaches to research, it is important to note the differences and what can come from them as a result. Dill (2010) found that workers who did not work with kin families stigmatized kin caregivers, seeing kin caregivers as clients themselves. There was a perception that the standards were lower for kin caregivers to take on the role as caregiver. With the stigma surrounding children placed in care, through the testimonies of workers and children interviewed that being placed in care appeared to mitigate the sense of stigma. For example, it was much easier to say, “I am living with my grandmother” than to say, “I am living in a CAS group home” (Dill, 2010). Furthermore, being able to live with extended families removes the idea of having to explain that CAS is involved which the public perceives as troubled or “bad” kids that are involved (Dill, 2010). In speaking with workers in the welfare system, Dill (2010) found that kin caregivers with pre-existing relationships with children in care seemed to bring out more in the caregivers involved whereas the experiences of working with kin caregivers with no pre-existing relationship with the child in care resembled foster placements. When a child is placed in a kinship setting, terms such as foster child, crown ward, and other labels need not apply. Being placed with extended family has the potential to equip children and youth with a different type of self-perception and a sense of normalcy that can build them up as a result if they can see themselves as part of the family (Dill, 2010).

León, Jiménez-Morago & Muñoz-Silva's (2017) article entitled, "Contact between birth parents and children in kinship care in a sample from Spain." Included 189 kinship families with an equal number of foster children residing in the province of Seville, Spain. They found that for various reasons, contact between parents and their children in kin placements was non-existent. Some of these reasons included lack of contact information, proximity and health related complications. For those children who had contact with their parents, the majority of visits lasted less than 2 hours. For some, visits took place less than once a month (Leon et al., 2017). Many families lacked professional supervised contact leaving the families involved with the burden of orchestrating visits. They found that kin caregivers that took steps to maintain the child's relationship with their birth parents had less behavioural problems, better communication with their birth parents which improves the probability of reunification in the future. What is troubling about their findings is that they resemble other studies carried out in Spain years ago that continue to shine light on the overwhelming number of children that have no contact with either parent and furthermore, why so little is being done on the part of service providers to maintain and nurture the bond between children and their birth parents once they have transitioned into care (Leon et al., 2017).

When participants are able to speak, the numbers can add weight to research findings. Kiraly and Humphreys (2016) examined family contact for children in kinship care. In terms of data collection, they gathered information from surveys from kinship guardians, parents and support works and also gathered their perspectives through focus groups and interviews. Numbers will never be able to portray everyone's experience and taking on a mixed methods approach provides that opportunity. Kiraly and Humphreys (2016) research took place in Australia. They were looking for ways in which the child's safety and well-being could best be

supported within the context of family contact in kinship care. Findings in this report showed that while there was a considerable amount of communication between parents of origin, avenues to speak to siblings or relatives were scarce. It was also noted that with respect to visits with mothers, unsupervised visits tended to be traumatic for the children involved due to the nature of unpredictable behaviour and incidents that took place during them. Supervision of parental contact for many parties involved had agreements where child protection or community services were not required to supervise these gatherings. Kiraly and Humphreys (2016) gathered that this put a lot of strain on the caregivers having to play the role of a supervisor in the midst of these interactions. Kinship support programs were at its inception at the time the research was taking place but there were limited resources available for caregivers to access in connecting children with their families and the support was minimal or non-existent (Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016). Their study unveiled the work that still needs to be done orchestrating family contact and the lack of support kin caregivers in general received stepping in to take care of their family members.

Kiraly and Humphreys (2016) speak to unanticipated issues they came across in their results that in their words, ‘threatened to overwhelm the focus of this study.’ One of the issues was the seriousness of the feedback about unmet needs that kinship guardians experience in a range of other areas other than family contact. The other issue was that one-fifth of survey respondents were friends or kith so there was a mix in terms of participants involved in this endeavour. This issue can be looked at in many ways depending on the research methodologies formulating the research. Taking on a qualitative approach allowed for participants to express concerns that the researchers were not even aware of. It is common throughout the research in academia that caregivers who unexpectedly find themselves taking on the role of guardian are

lacking many supports but to the extent and range of support that was discovered through this research was uncovered based on the approach of inquiry used to draw out their knowledge and experience.

Limitation and Gaps

There are gaps in the research process and voices that need to be heard to a greater extent. In some form or another, it is fair to say that most voices involved have been heard. Until every voice is heard, the research is incomplete. Monsterrat (2007) sought to observe the situation of kinship care in the city of Barcelona and took into account visitation access among other characteristics. Parents voices were not heard because of the difficulty accessing them once their children were in care (Monsterrat, 2007). Best (2014) revealed the main factors that contributed to the success of transnational parenting. A beautiful ethnographic piece that relies on grounded theory allows the reader to witness the hardships families have to undergo to give their families a better life. An important voice that is absent is the children on the other end. To tie this in with the research out there that suggests kinship care is a step forward, a step in the right direction from agencies and caseworkers alike (Brisebois, 2013; Cudjoe, 2019; Hedin, 2012), does it follow that everyone involved agrees and are these voices allowed to interject? It is not an easy question to answer. One thread that is common amongst the research is the need for more research to give voices to the most vulnerable. Hedin's 2017 study sums it up nicely:

“First and foremost, foster children and youth need to be listened to regarding their own understanding and perspectives. To follow them over time provides a fairer and more nuanced picture of their circumstances than just making a single landing in their everyday life and is a strategy which can be used more in future research about children and young people in foster care” (p.77).

While the focus here is geared towards foster children and youth, this sentiment should span across folks involved whose voices are also limited, including but not limited to kinship caregivers, biological parents, siblings and other extended family members. The research outlined in this section speaks to many positive attributes kinship care can provide to children, youth and their families as a whole (Dill, 2010; Hedin, 2012; Brisebois, 2013; Kiraly & Humphreys, 2016; Cudjoe, 2019).

While more voices do need to be heard, there seems to be a real strain on kin families that are not being addressed (Cudjoe, 2019). It is important that the research being produced speaks to this, if it goes in that direction. A one size fits all approach to kinship care has many opportunities to cause harm to families in today's society considering the idea of family is constantly challenged from a colonial point of view. From the critical race perspective, how are systems in place shifting their duties onto others? How are institutions dictating access and what impact if any is it having on Black families? With the idea of keeping children within their family and community in mind, are there still obstacles that prohibit Black families from access and to what extent. What is this doing to their sense of identity and culture? It is important to welcome any new information that presents itself so that it can be examined. Any opportunities that might arise to add to the knowledges already out there will only benefit existing families that may not otherwise be represented in the data currently available. In setting requirements to the data, we as researchers run the risk of excluding potential participants and their knowledges the implications of producing research that does not reflect a group that is known to exist within the community can be interpreted in many ways. Ultimately, it speaks to the research that still needs to be done pertaining to the issues in question. Kinship care in Ontario is a fairly new practice. It will not be perfect and it is beneficial that those taking on such roles to love and care for family

members are supported and heard as they take on this endeavour. It is quite difficult to receive such answers when participants impacted do not have a platform to speak on but further research on the issue at hand can help build upon what has been established.

3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework that will inform this major research paper will be drawn from anti-Black racism. I will use this theoretical framework to navigate research about the child welfare system's treatment of Black children and families and the result of hidden institutional biases in policies, practices and procedures that privilege some groups and disadvantage others. Kumsa, Mfoafo-M'Carthy, Oba and Gaasim (2014) cite a Black research participant who said that "racism has many faces; it changes its color like a chameleon and lashes out its tentacles in many directions like an octopus." The long-standing reach racism has in major institutions like child welfare cannot be ignored. Anti-Black racism needs to be addressed specifically.

Thobani (2007) argued that the overrepresentation of Black and aboriginal children in Canada's child welfare system was an accurate depiction of the historical dominance of white supremacy in this country. Pon et al. (2011) describes how colonialism and the idea of fixing other communities white Europeans came in contact with is still a notion that is prevalent and justified to this day. The impression that placing Black children in the care of white families as a way to salvage children from potentially worse outcomes in their own communities was a belief shared by organizations in other Canadian cities throughout the 1950s and 1960s (Maynard, 2017).

The issues of anti-Black racism in the child welfare system is still present although it has altered the way it presents itself nor has it gone unnoticed as people inside and outside of the child welfare system share their unique experiences (Pon et al, 2011; Maynard, 2017; Brisebois, 2013; Gosine & Pon, 2011; Dill, 2010). Kumsa et al. (2014) speak of anti-Black racism in a layered manner. In the way that racism is directed against Black people, it can just as well be a form of racism that Black people propagate and lastly, a combination of sorts of the first two

perspectives (Kumsa et al., 2014). The concept of anti-Black racism paints a picture of the racism experienced by Black people in Canada and highlights how racism masquerades itself in laws and practices (Dei, 2008; James et al., 2010; Pon et al. 2011).

Western and Eurocentric thoughts and practices pertaining to the family has made it difficult for Black families. The representation of Black children and families are cast as unfit, requiring the need of supervision (Maynard, 2017). Unable to properly care for their own, there is a greater sense of what practices are appropriate and in essence, creates a greater divide as Blackness and the stereotypes surrounding Blackness are magnified, positioned outside the realm of normalcy (Dei, 2008). Whiteness and its visual image of normalcy for most people in North American society allows members of the dominant group to easily deny their complicity in oppression. Drawing on shared histories of oppression as a source of social action not only presents the opportunity of reconstructing an image that has negatively portrayed individuals but also provides room to challenge dominant discourses and institutional practices that reflect the dominance of whiteness (Dei, 1997). Coupled with dignity, this approach to social action can also foster connection with the greater community at large and bring healing in coming together (Kumsa et al., 2014).

Dei (1997) states the importance of contextualizing the responses of individuals make to domination that stress the saliency of race in their lives. While the grouping of multiple voices can render other voices hidden to a degree, capturing as much diversity and multiplicity of the human experience in an attempt to capture the myriad of identities crossing paths with oppressive relations is necessary in context (Dei, 1997).

Clarke et al., (2015) suggest that while it is difficult implementing the concept of anti-Black racism into the different fields of social work, it is necessary in hopes of moving the profession forward toward addressing racism, colonialism and white supremacy in Canadian society and I believe that it always starts with those who have been impacted directly to share their experiences. Those on the other side who take the time to listen may not be able to fully comprehend the struggles or hardships of being a Black person in the child welfare system but being aware is just one step in the direction of bringing about a change in the way things have been established.

The importance of gathering voices in this realm is done to bring a spotlight on those directly impacted by these changes. Racialized workers in the child welfare system have shared their voices in speaking to having to contend with white-normed and middle-class oriented policies and practices that have immobilized them from meeting the needs of unique racialized service users (Gosine & Pon, 2011). As more Black, African and Caribbean experiences are shared from various levels and perspectives can we create a picture of what is going on. While the picture is becoming clearer, there is still room for many to share their experiences of anti-Black racism they have endured in hopes that their stories will shape the way the child welfare system functions moving forward. A system that would be more equitable, aware and compassionate to those they are servicing. In Gosine & Pon's (2011) findings, they found workers in child welfare they interviewed silenced and subject to the racist stereotypes also frequently applied to Black service users. Dumbrill (2003) highlights the importance of eliciting the experiences and perspectives of child welfare professionals that come from traditionally marginalized groups to further address and bring to light oppressive practices inside the system and out.

Oral history is a research method that encapsulates both academic and indigenous traditions with the intent of seeking out individuals' perspectives on events they have experienced (Williams, 2019). This method has the ability to empower individuals, particularly marginalized and oppressed individuals who might not otherwise have any other way of voicing their perspectives (Williams, 2019).

4. METHODOLOGY

This research will contribute to the evidence presented in the literature reflecting the need and importance of having a kinship model present for Black families. The research will examine the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and their response to the issue of anti-Black racism internally. The research will explore in which ways kinship care benefits former children and youth who participated in the model while also reviewing the ways in which children and youth were impacted under other models. What similarities if any can be drawn from the experiences held under different forms of care and what stands out? Cultural ties and efforts to reunify families will be examined from the perspectives of former youth that have provided insight through their stories.

There are two primary sources used to gather data for this research. These include the Children's Aid Foundation blog site entitled, 'The Buzz' and a video from the YouTube channel 'Caribvibetv' entitled, 'The Children's Aid Society of Toronto.' Through these two primary sources, data was gathered. Through a grounded theory approach, I discover themes both from the youth in care and from service providers. I discovered the following themes: cultural identity and identity construction. These themes are more fully developed in findings section.

Open access to families of origin in kinship care and the research on this topic from a qualitative lens has given particular voices the chance to truly express themselves. Questions that make space and give room for participants to share their stories without restraint is a necessary piece of data that is absent in much of the research. From the quantitative works explored, it is quite clear that the agenda is for the researcher to prove something, for the question proposed to take a stance. (Neuman, 2013).

Prior to the events that took place in the world regarding COVID-19, my initial intention was to take an interpretivist approach to this research based on face to face interviews. Data collection would consist of semi-structured interviews with a limited number of open-ended questions that would leave enough room for participants to share whatever was on their heart beyond the questions provided. A change due to COVID 19 altered my approach away from fact to face contact. With changes to the research due to COVID 19, I researched existing interviews and blog posts that exist on line. I looked at stories of both youth who have been in care and service providers in the child welfare system.

Through storytelling, many of the stories presented have the potential to be shared with a wider audience. The stories of youth that I draw from exist online in the form of a blog on the website of the Children's Aid Foundation. These stories spotlight the experiences of youth who have aged out of care while in care. The narratives on this blog provide insight from the perspectives of children and youth's personal struggles navigating through the system while in care. A qualitative design by focussing on a group that is at the centre of service but far too often, whose feedback is seldom heard. In a volatile welfare system that is making an effort to create space at the table to lend an ear to voices that have been silenced, every voice matters (Kumsa et al., 2014).

The Children's Aid Foundation of Canada has set up a website entitled 'The Buzz' that articles individuals' stories in the form of blogs. The blog seeks to create a space for voices to share their experiences as they have made their way through the child welfare system. 'Young People in Profile' is a series that focuses on the journeys of former children and youth in care. This is one primary source of data from my research that I introduces voices that were courageous enough to share their story in this format. Most of the stories shared involve youth

who are connected to the Children's Aid Foundation, spending valuable time and effort displaying their skills and talents to enact change in the system.

The YouTube Channel 'Caribvibetv' highlights the best in Caribbean entertainment, lifestyle and culture. This online channel has been active since 2014 and most recently, uploaded a video focussed on the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and the programs supporting Black communities. Interviews were conducted with service providers that gave opportunities for former youth and service providers the chance to address their experiences and responses to the challenges currently being faced in this institution. This collection of interviews that took place in the video entitled 'Children's Aid Society' (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nYAPNkFpupY>) released in April of 2020. This collection of interviews was another primary source of information. This video provides multiple interviews consisting of CAS employees as well as youth that were involved with the child welfare system at a particular point. Most of these interviews took place at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto. Those interviewed had their names displayed and will also be mentioned in the findings section.

There were ten blog posts from the Children's Aid Foundation blog, each with their own set of experiences and insights that are all valuable in their own right. Jessica, Jemal, Raquel, Brittany, Alisha, Troy, Cheyanne, Christina, Justin and Kahleen each share unique foster and kinship experiences in the child welfare system. I looked for themes among the 10 above interviews. Also, there are four interviews that took place involving service providers and a former youth in care from the Caribvibetv channel. These interviews were grouped into similar common themes. Farrell Hall, Director of Diversity at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto (CAST). Mahesh Prajapat, Chief Operating Officer at CAST. John Telfer, Supervisor at CAST.

Judie Powell, Kinship Assessment Worker at CAST. Kevin Yarde, Anti-Black Racism Practice Lead at CAST. Anna Amy Ho, an ambassador at the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada. Lastly, Rachel, a former youth in care, Although the blog posts and interviews are from service users and service providers the themes were created across all the online research subjects. In this way there is an expression of 'two sides of the same coin' That is, we hear from the youth about what the experience and we hear from the service providers about their actions.

The youth whose stories have been shared in the findings have had experiences in the child welfare system for an extended period of time. Their experiences may vary with respect to the care they received at the time. Some had the chance to be placed under the care of a guardian through the kinship process. Others were placed in foster care with others in group home settings. A few individuals have experienced living under more than one of these conditions throughout their childhood, being transitioned from one foster home to another. All those research subjects who shared their stories either identified as Black, had Black guardians or identified with Black, African and Caribbean culture.

Incorporating the voices of service providers in the data collection section gives an opportunity for those in the positions to act on concerns that have been raised by communities most impacted. Also having a chance to hear those who work for the CAS as they enact change for other service providers and families involved is an important aspect to include in the research. This allows for the purpose of accountability but also shows the tangible efforts taking place as the CAS moves forward to correct wrongs of the past. Interviews from case workers, supervisors and chief operating officers from different departments were explored to discuss ways they were tackling anti-Black racism in the agency along with ways to better support

children and families that they serviced through cultural programs and partnerships with supports within the community

The data collected from blog posts were transcribed on the website. Data collected from service providers and a select number of former children and youth in care were transcribed from video interviews verbatim. These interviews took place from 2016 to 2020 in Ontario and they will be examined from an ABR lens.

The interviews from both the blogpost and Caribvibetv's YouTube channel were transcribed. Once they were transcribed, they were grouped according to common themes touched upon. As such, the themes were created based on commonalities. In this manner I took a grounded theory approach to the data (Pulla, 2014). The themes include the Lack of Attention to the Family of Origin; Cultural Identity and Identity Confusion when moved to Foster Care; Stigma & Well-being in Care; and Black Youth responses to kinship care and foster care.

Grounded theory was the approach that was ultimately decided on as qualitative data was gathered through oral interviews on Caribvibetv's YouTube video entitled, "Children's Aid Society of Toronto" and written interviews from The Buzz, The Children's Aid Foundation of Canada's blog (<https://www.cafdn.org/thebuzz/>) in an attempt to find and extract themes. With this approach, theoretical cases were grounded in the data collected through the interviews (Charmaz, 2000; Pulla, 2014). This approach to research does not come without its limitations as in this case, not having direct contact with the individuals sharing their experiences will not always allow room for clarification or follow up as the interviews were documented in blogs and video format.

Grounded theory methods consist of systematic inductive guidelines for collecting and analyzing data to build middle-range theoretical frameworks in an attempt to explain the

collected data. (Charmaz, 2000). Through the research process, grounded theorists develop analytic interpretations of their data to focus further data collection, which is then used to inform and refine their developing theoretical analyses (Charmaz, 2000).

5. FINDINGS

This section of the research paper will present findings gathered from blogs and interviews where former children in youth in the child welfare system shared various aspects of their experience in this setting. The participants article their journey from apprehension to their placement and divulge what occurred throughout that time before transitioning to independence. There are common themes that were noted in the blog posts and interviews that will be expanded on as the findings present themselves. The themes that will be discussed are (a) the family unit breakdown (b) cultural identity and (c) the stigma endured from being placed in care. Service providers and community partners have also had interviews conducted addressing the themes aforementioned and will also speak to them in this section. I then summarize agency response to the issues that come up for Black youth in care.

BLACK YOUTH WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED CHILD WELFARE RESPONSES

The Lack of Attention to the Family of Origin

In reading each of the individual pieces, one thing that was worth highlighting was the relationship youth had with their family of origin. Many of the individuals who shared their story had all in some way shape or form been separated from someone in their family. For some it was their parents, for others siblings and distant relatives. In each of these cases, participants share their relationships with their family members as they grew up in care.

Kahleen did not recall how old she was when she came into care and was not fully aware of the process that she suddenly found herself involved in. She shares her mindset at the time she was being transitioned from her home to a foster care placement and recalls the lack of transparency regarding the situation:

I was supposed to be going on a school trip with the rest of my class, however, my dad didn't want me to go so he told me to go to my community center, which was across the

street from my school at the time. I received a call from a family member that I went to school with and he said that there were police officers at the school looking for me. My principal decided to call my parents, and when he heard what [my dad] had to say, he looked at me and said, 'you're not going to be going home.' I didn't think that it would get so extreme. It all happened very quickly. I remember that the morning went by very fast and, by the evening, I was sitting in the police station for a very long time. I ended up going into a temporary home for a few nights until they were able to find me a placement where I was able to go.

Kahleen elaborates a bit more on the transition into care as it was happening:

A big challenge was hiding the fact that I was a foster kid because, when I went into care, there was a lot of mystery around what happened. There were police at the school and no one really knew if they would be taking me, or what would happen. I was missing from school for probably about three, maybe four days until everything was actually clear and settled, and I had a home to go to.

Kahleen had this to say on what family meant to her:

"I used to think for a long time that family was the group of people that you actually came from, that you lived with, that was your actual bloodline. I've come to the understanding that family is something that you can make. Family to me are people who try to provide support and help when you need it, even when you don't ask for it, the people that genuinely want to see good happen for you."

Troy, an only child, was in grade three when his mother really began to struggle with mental health challenges and had difficulties raising him. He shares his response to this experience:

One of my greatest challenges was coming to understand that everything happens for a reason. As a child, it was really hard to comprehend what was happening, and identity was a big hurdle for me. It was hard to understand why I wasn't living with my mother. A lot of it was accepting what had happened, taking the time to find out who I was, and finding a way to move forward.

Justin was 12 years old when he entered foster care citing substance abuse challenges his mother was facing at the time. It was this event that led to involvement with the Children's Aid Society.

While Justin may have been separated from his mother for a period of time, he was able to maintain a relationship with other members of his family:

"I define family as people whose needs you put before your own. It doesn't mean that you're necessarily biologically related, but if you put their needs ahead of your own, they're your family. Going through the experiences that I have, my bond with my siblings

is now pretty much unbreakable. I think my experiences in care helped me understand what it means to really care for someone through the good times and the bad times. I [developed] a newfound appreciation for myself and my family.”

Christina came to Canada when she was 12 years old and it was a difficult period adjusting to different cultural norms that those that she grew up in. She cites many issues of abuse and neglect in the home. Christina has many difficult decisions to make as she grew older and one of them was deciding to move on, loving her parents from a distance:

“Family is something that builds you and breaks you. For me, I know my family is there for me, but they don’t want the things that I want. And for me to move forward, I can’t allow them to define where my life is going. At ages 18 and 19 that was happening. Now, family is important, but I feel like I don’t need them to [define my life].”

Alisha was living with her mother and her boyfriend at the time the Children’s Aid Society got involved as a result of substance abuse issues.

“I didn’t really understand the relationship between my mom and me; it’s just how it was.

With that being said, she has been able to form relationships on a level where she considers those close to her family:

“Family does not necessarily mean that we bleed the same blood; it means people who accept me for my flaws and accept me for who I am. It’s my friends, it’s my boss, it’s the family that I’ve made for myself. I have lots of extended family, and anywhere I work I feel like a mother hen. I have a daughter, too.”

Brittany entered foster care at the age of 12 when her mother had undergone mental health challenges. Her idea of family changed as she grew older:

When I was much younger, I thought that family meant your nuclear, biological family, and the older I’ve gotten, the more I’ve realized that DNA doesn’t make a family. Family is anyone who is going to support you and stick with you because they want to see you succeed, and they’ll support you in your endeavours to get there. You can call them up and say ‘I’m having a rough time’, and they want to talk to you about it. Family is something that you choose. I have my partner, I have my roommate, my dog, and my adoptive parents.”

Brittany, who is supported by the Children's Aid Foundation had this to say about the ongoing support can do for a child in care:

Here's something about supporting youth in care: we exist in this limbo in society. Like, even if someone's home life isn't perfect, they tend to still have some support from your family or people they've grown-up with. Kids from care don't have those relationships.

Cheyenne entered the child welfare system when she was 14 years old. Her story is a bit different in that entering the system was a choice that she made as a result of domestic issues that stemmed from home.

The Children's Aid Society stepped-in and asked me 'are you going home?' and I decided [I] didn't even want to talk to my mother."

Cheyenne took this opportunity to acquire a place of safety and stability and in the process, heal.

"For me, family is a social construction; it's not who you are born into, it's not about only having biological relationships, it's about who has your back? Who can you turn to? When I was growing-up, I had already told myself in my head that my biological family was not my family. The only person I really saw as my family was my uncle, but he passed away when I was in grade three. As an adult, I've been able to add members of my biological family back into my inner-circle, especially my cousins.

Jemal was three years old when he became a crown ward as a result of neglectful home environment.

My mother was in care when she became pregnant with me, at the age of 15. During that time, she started abusing narcotics, and this led to neglect, and ultimately the Children's Aid Society stepping-in.

Jemal describes the status of his relationship with his family of origin and challenges along the way:

"Maintaining a relationship with my parents and birth family was really challenging; I went to visitations, but nobody really helped me navigate the complicated dynamic. I mean, I would see my mother and stay at my grandmother's on visitations, but I never really formed a strong relationship with them, especially at that time. Most of my relationship-building happened with my birth family once I got older. It was a really strange relationship; my father had more children after I was born, and they lived with him and then my grandmother. I found it hard to distinguish what was different between me and them; they were able to stay and I was sent away to my foster home.

Jessica was raised for her grandmother and for as long as she could remember was faced with questions revolving around her family:

They would then ask me the inevitable questions: “why didn’t your mom raise you?” “Who is your dad?” and “what’s your background?”

Jessica was in a position where she had a lot of questions herself. With that being said, Jessica was reunited with her mother. There was a lot took place to get their relationship to where it is today and there is still room for their relationship to grow but they are there for each other:

Wonderfully, today is a much different story. I am 100% confident in who I am and I am happy to share my story with anyone and everyone. My mom and I are not as close as we could be, but it’s a relationship that I continually strive to improve. Her illness is not an illness to me anymore; it’s who she is and I have learned to accept her for her not for who I want her to be.

Raquel was placed into foster care at the age of nine years old when it was discovered that she had been physically abused. Raquel was placed in a number of foster care placements before settling in to one that really made her feel safe. Raquel had the opportunity to be adopted by the family that had been taking care of her for the better part of her life and recalls bringing this news to her mother:

“I met-up with my biological mother and had the conversation with her about being adopted, and she was furious. She really couldn’t understand or see it from my perspective; you know, all the years that went by, where she wasn’t able to be there, and the pain she inflicted on me; I just couldn’t pretend like everything was OK.

Raquel defines family in this way:

“Family is being able to share a bond with someone you love; it doesn’t have to be blood-related. There has to be a sense of feeling comfortable with that person and confiding in that person, and being able to share anything with them.

Dann was placed into care at the age of eight or nine years old:

My mother was very sick, and could still be sick now. I haven’t seen her in 11 years, so I don’t know if she sought any help, but I do know she was advised to see a doctor

At the time of placement, he was separated from some of his siblings and found it difficult adjusting to the care he was receiving from his foster parents:

Connecting with my foster parents was weird, because they're not actually my parents but were acting like it, whereas my real parent was not acting like a parent.

Rachel was interviewed by Caribvibetv on her experience in care:

At the age of four, I was taken into care and I was never exposed to Black people. I was put into a white foster home for approximately 12 years and I never was exposed to Black excellence. I was never exposed to resilience. I was never exposed to my own kind, my own culture for a very long time.

Cultural Identity and Identity Confusion when moved to Foster Care

Identity and the cultural piece tied to that identity was a theme that permeated through many of these stories. For many who had been separated from their families and placed in environments that did not reflect their upbringing at all, any semblance of what they grew up being accustomed to was halted. While some environments may not have been ideal on an emotional supportive level, the case for cultural integration could still be made.

Kahleen points out how activities in her daily life were placed before her, with no input from her:

Eventually, I got into the groove of school, but that took a while because when I got to the new foster home, there wasn't a discussion about what school I would be going to. And I didn't think that school would have to be a big issue or something that I would have had to fight for. But I was placed from the public school board into a Catholic school board. I had never been to a Catholic school before, and I was told, 'okay here is your uniform, this is where you're going now.' Nobody asked my opinion about anything, about moving here, about going to school. I was very frustrated."

Troy found expressing himself in artistic fashion helped him get through many rough patches

"I realized that other youth in care were struggling to find their identities, too. I was able to really get into spoken word, something I've been doing for the past four years. It gave me a platform to express myself and break things down more, and explore things in my own life. It was almost like connecting the dots; I shaped my identity based on the image those dots, once connected, created."

Rachel, with support from programs like Soul Journey, exposed her to her culture and allowed her to experience what she had been longing to be a part of:

...when I went to Soul Journey, I experienced my own culture. I experienced what it's like to be Black. I experienced what it's like not to be ashamed of who I was.

Rachel took part in Soul Journey, an initiative that gave her the courage to advocate in response to her current situation at the time:

I think that programs like Soul Journey are extremely important because when I came back from my first Soul Journey trip, I advocated to be placed out of the first group home I was currently in, into a Black foster home which I never experienced. So then when I went to move into the Black foster home, I was exposed to resilience. I was exposed to my foster mom working two jobs in order to provide for us. I was exposed to my culture. I was exposed to what it's like being a Black person in general.

Cheyenne came into foster care to heal, and having stability to find herself played an important piece.

A lot of my [journey] has been a healing process and trying to figure out my identity and trying to rebuild my confidence. Foster care is definitely a double-edged sword; I never looked at it as a struggle for me, my struggle was coming to terms with who I was as a person and learning to love myself. Growing-up, my [darker] skin colour was an issue.

Cheyenne goes on to speak on what family means:

When I started high school, I met my best friend and she became my sister. I started to couch surf at her house, and [because of her family's heritage], I started to identify with the Guyanese, Trini, Jamaican communities. I remember walking into the group home and I was the only Brown person – I was the Black sheep again. But eventually you get to know these people and they become part of your family. Family gets created in different spaces; it's always created. It's an important discovery I made for myself."

Jemal and his siblings had moved into a household that he was not familiar with and found it difficult for some time to adjust.

I had to deal with the constant struggle of everyone around me trying to figure out how I was associated with my foster parents. I lived with this family for 11 years, and really began to identify with them, but it was still hard to form my own identity."

Jessica had difficulty coming to terms with her identity when she was younger and felt the burden of having to explain to others who she was:

High school was the hardest, as being “mixed-race” everyone wanted to know what I was mixed with. I literally started saying that I was half Jamaican to avoid explaining my story.

Not knowing my biological father or my heritage catalyzed much insecurity throughout my adolescence. To top it off, having a mother with a severe mental illness made things even more stressful. I was always craving “normalcy” and embarrassed that my mom was who she was. I just wanted to have a regular family like everyone else seemingly had.

Jessica was reunited with her mother as she grew older and it is encouraging to see how she came to terms with everything that happened along the way.

Life is incredible and sometimes we are dealt cards that we cannot choose. Luckily, there are also some cards that we do get to pick from the deck; those are the ones that truly matter. Having the ability to unapologetically be who you are is one of the keys to inner joy. Knowing yourself, accepting yourself, owning your story and becoming the person you are meant to be is another. I am truly grateful for my mom, my story, and for the strong person I have become as a result. This is my mom and I am immensely proud to be her daughter.

Raquel was placed in a foster home when she was 12. The same foster home that she was placed in was the same foster home that would adopt her.

When I was about 16 or 17, I had the decision to make whether I wanted to move back home, transition to independence, or continue living with my foster mother. I thought: ‘I’ve been living with her for so long, I’ve become comfortable with myself, and I’ve had so many experiences with her,’ and so we talked about the idea of her adopting me. I wasn’t officially adopted until I was about 23 or 24. I think the Children’s Aid Society wanted to wait until I was a bit older, so I could make the best decision for myself. But, I just knew, and Sheila [my adoptive mother] was able to provide the care and services to me that my own mother probably couldn’t have given.”

Stigma & Well-being in Care

When it comes to the stigma and well-being of children and youth in care, many of the individuals interviewed had first hand experiences pertaining to the subject. Through no fault of their own and simply just being placed in the child welfare system brought a lot of unnecessary

discrimination. Through no fault of their own were they subjected to stereotypes that are tied to children and youth in care.

Kahleen points out how important donations to foundations like the Children's Aid Foundation are for youth like her in care:

It's very hard to find people who do not know you and that are very accepting of your situation and that want to help you as your own family should. I am very thankful for that because they have provided very many opportunities

Troy found support in education. Through the scholarships granted to him to further his education, he saw that as an opportunity to improve his life.

People need to understand that whatever you put in; you get out. That dynamic is everywhere. If you want to witness the success of the next generation, you have to put into it, and support it. If you don't, it becomes very difficult for youth from care to move on and become resilient

Justin was placed in the care of his aunt and sister. He makes a point about the different scenarios that make up the child welfare system and being mindful of how each situation should be addressed. In Justin's situation, support was needed in order for him to pursue a secondary education:

Youth from care are often put into the same category; I don't think enough attention is given to the fact that situations vary so much [for them]. Within the general public, it's important for people to know that even though youth may have been [placed with a stable family], they still need support.

Brittany shared the reality of how vulnerable children can be in care and its impact on relationships later in life:

There's this real loneliness that kids who end up in care feel; I think it comes from this concept that we're expendable. That if we don't behave a certain way, we can be gone; that makes it really hard for us to form relationships, especially because most people who end-up in care are in their emotionally formative years. We're left with this understanding: 'if I'm not valuable enough to my parent, how am I valuable to anybody else?' You go into adulthood feeling worthless and not good enough. And that feeling remains, I'm sure not just with me, but with lots of other youth from care.

Identifying as a youth came with its burdens and Brittany found that it was not always the best thing to inform others about for a plethora of reasons:

“There are a lot of different stigmas facing youth from care; for example, that we’re all badly behaved children, and that’s why we’re in care. Another stigma is that we’re in care because we have mental health issues, and I think that kind of stigma follows kids around. It’s a problem because not only does it affect how your peers view you, but how your teachers and other authority figures view you, in terms of interactions and relationships. It’s definitely not the first thing that I tell people when I meet them, because it could be a red flag for them. A lot of [the stigma] is because people are uneducated on why kids go into care, and I think the blame is placed on children. There’s another misconception that foster kids don’t do anything — that we freeload from the government and [are lazy]. And, that’s really hurtful, because I work too hard to be told I don’t do anything.”

Jemal shared similar experiences in regards to be associated with being a child in care:

Just because I was raised in care, doesn’t mean that I’m troubled. I feel when people hear that I was raised in care, they often automatically feel pity and that even some people might think that I couldn’t be a functioning member of society. I would like to tell these people: ‘not to judge me by the reasons I grew-up in care’.

Raquel found herself ostracized from friends because of where she came from. She was met with disdain for being a child in the welfare system, something beyond her control:

Some parents tell their kids: ‘don’t associate with kids who come from the child welfare system; you don’t know what they’ve been through, it could have a negative impact on you’. I’ve actually had a few friends who I lost when their parents found out I was in the child welfare system.”

She stresses the importance of ongoing support.

I want people to know that a lot of youth from care aren’t given opportunities because of living in the system. We’re stigmatized; people think that youth from care won’t go anywhere in life, they have a bad reputation, and they don’t need any more support. But we can be successful;

Dann found himself struggling with depression and having gone through it, understands the impact it can have on children’s wellbeing to thrive in school or in their personal relationships.

There is a lot at stake in these formidable years:

People in the general population, who aren't in care, don't necessarily understand what it's like. They need to trust that it's possible to get from a bad spot to complete success. It won't be easy, but it's very possible. A lot of the time, it's good kids in bad situations."

Black Youth responses to kinship care and foster care

This section will note those who had the experience of one or the other and in a few cases, having experienced both foster and kinship care.

Kahleen had the unique experience of being placed with a family she knew and later on, moving to a foster placement:

My experience in care has been interesting. When I first got into care, I actually knew the family that I would be living with, but I didn't know that before arriving at their home. Living with [that family] was pretty fun. They made sure at all times that, whether we were foster children or her own children, we were treated the same.

Kahleen notes that the beginning of her foster care journey was a better experience because she was familiar with who she was with and was still in the same environment albeit under a different roof. When she was placed, that sentiment changed:

I feel like maybe the beginning of my experience in living in a [foster] home was better because I was familiar with the neighbourhood I grew up in, I didn't have to be uprooted too much from my routine. But when I got moved, I didn't even know that was where I was going. I found out while we were driving there and I was so terrified.

Troy had an overall positive experience in his foster placement. After a few temporary placements, he was placed with a family who he then lived with for the course of 13 years. It is a home that he considers permanent.

I was born an only child, but because of my foster placement, I was able to grow up with siblings. It was a really positive experience for me."

For a short period, Christina had foster parents that resembled her and her culture. She describes her experience living in a foster setting versus that of a group home setting:

"I lived in a semi-group home for most of the time, but it was a positive experience. In a foster family, you get to be part of a family, while at a group home there are [more rules]; like, you have to be home at a certain time. You want to be home with your family

to share in holiday activities, but in a group home [with a structured environment], [there's less freedom] and you're forced to have certain hours to do your own activities, like laundry."

Justin, looking back, realized that while he was still connected to his family, there were still parts of him that were impacted by the transition:

I was in kinship care with my aunt and then I moved in with my sister. It was pretty difficult, because every time I moved it meant that I had to switch schools. When I lived with my sister that was the best experience, because she was very open and understanding at the time.

Justin goes on to share what it was like growing up in the child welfare system and how it impacted him in his formative years:

"I used to be a loud, outgoing kid, but I think as a teenager I became more reserved because of what I was going through. These last couple years, I was able to build a bit of my confidence back, but as a teenager [my care experience] was very detrimental to my self-esteem. It was tough not having a stable foundation right away, and I think that's where confidence comes from. When you know that you're going to be OK and things will be consistent, you can go through life with a sense of purpose."

Brittany has vacillated between kinship care, foster care as well as the care of her mother.

Brittany had the option of choosing to move in with her aunt and uncle away from home or attend a foster placement so that she could finish the last six weeks of school. Brittany points out the isolation of being transported to a secluded area with little to no means of being able to access things that were important to her:

"Loneliness was a huge challenge for me; I moved between London, Ontario, then to Stratford, then to a tiny town, then to Toronto. For me, the loneliness of never really having a set group of friends, because you're constantly moving and changing schools, was really hard. I think multiple issues can stem from that; from depression to isolation. It's not like your foster parents can drive you everywhere, every time; so, if you're living in the country, you're kind of out of luck if you want to see friends. And, that was one of the largest challenges I faced. Great people lived where I lived, but it was so small. Not being able to participate in parties and events, because again — you have to drive everywhere, and sometimes your foster parents can't drive you — was really challenging, especially as a teenager and wanting to have a social life."

Jemal shares his initial reaction upon moving into his new foster placement:

My sibling and I ended up moving into a house with our foster parents at the time, and it was very strange for me because, as an African-Canadian male, I was moving into an all-white home and neighbourhood.

Entering the foster care system at the age of 9, Raquel shares her experiences in her early years in the system:

The transition into care was very traumatizing because I didn't know where I would be placed. I was moved into a few different foster homes, then when I was about 12-years-old, I was placed into a foster home with my now adoptive mother.

SERVICE PROVIDERS RESPONSES

In this section, there will be a focus on the responses made to the experiences shared by former youth in care. Service providers from the Children Aid's Society were interviewed and addressed plans that their agency has already implemented as well as endeavours that will be fleshed out in the coming years to speak to concerns those primarily impacted by services have mentioned throughout the years.

The Lack of Attention to the Family of Origin

The need for families to take care of their own children cannot be stressed enough. Farrell Hall, Director of Diversity at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto acknowledged as an organization, the disparity, disproportionality and discrimination in the child welfare agency.

Frankly, the outcomes for children and youth have always been important to me in my career. So when I came to the agency and I saw the hard cold data, I really wanted to help the agency radically change this practice of child welfare so that we could truly support families and allow them to raise their own children, connect them to community service providers and make this an agency that people want to come towards instead of run away from for service.

In keeping with strength building, Mahesh Prajapat, Chief Operating Officer at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto mentioned what he would like to see the Society look like in the future:

We know that governments and systems cannot raise children and we know that the outcomes for those children are really poor. We really want to build trust between

ourselves and the African Caribbean community so that community sees us as a source of support and help and sees us as an organization that is genuinely invested in the success of their family.

John Telfer, a Supervisor at the Children's Aid Society runs the program Caring Dads, a group intervention program for men involved in abuse, neglect or having exposed their children to domestic violence. John speaks on the importance of this program for the benefit of family reunification:

History has shown that when fathers perpetuate violence, they were kept out of the family home or kept out of the picture and we just focus on working with the mother and the children to keep 'child safety.' We realized that does not work for families.

John shares his experiences working with Black fathers and some of the obstacles they inevitably face because the state of institutions like child welfare:

In my experience running the Caring Dads program, many Black fathers want to be inclusive in their child's life. They want to be better fathers but because of the fear in the system and consequences, they have that fear so they aren't engaged.

In the Children's Aid of Society's annual report for 2019/2020, it states that it has had an anti-oppression policy in place for over a decade. It goes on further to state that its workforce reflects the diversity of the communities it serves. Judie Powell mentioned in her interview that a racial matched foster home doesn't necessarily mean that it is a cultural match and hones in on the importance of that cultural piece being just as relevant as the racial factor. The themes present in the interviews speak to the lack of support youth have been receiving on a cultural level and how that has impacted other areas of their lives. With that being said, it is encouraging to see the efforts taking place to instill programming and events that speak to these areas of support that have been absent for so long and responses from youth first hand that have benefited from it. There is still room to grow as an agency but it is reassuring to know that efforts are taking place and work is being done to change the way the agency operates.

“If a child is determined to be at imminent and serious risk, provisions exist in each Canadian jurisdiction to immediately apprehend the child” (Regehr et al., 2016, pg. 90). Regehr and Antle (1997) also point out that while child welfare involvement is voluntary, it is argued that such is not always the case, especially considering when the custody of the child is at stake. There were a few individuals interviewed that found it difficult to mend relationships that have been in limbo since entering the welfare system, some stating having to do the groundwork on their own. With others unsure of the status of their caregivers of origin. It begs the question, what if anything is being done to reunify children with their families. It is worth noting that not every situation is the same and, in some cases, youth may want to distance themselves from their family and should be given that space if that is their desire. With that being said, is a process like child protection mediation, a voluntary, confidential process in which a neutral third party helps a child’s family and social worker reach mutually agreeable plans resolving concerns regarding the safety of a child being used? (Regehr, et al., 2016). What about family group conferencing? One of the limitations as a result of the method used in this research that would be worth exploring would revolve around the family reunification process for children and families in care and what that looked like. John Telfer, a supervisor that also runs the Caring Dads program at the Children’s Aid Society of Toronto makes note of the issues fathers face and have faced when accused of abuse, neglect or harm. There needs to be efforts made not only to include families but also recognizing the spaces in which we make efforts to include families. “Beyond profiling and invasive surveillance, the experiences of Black families with child welfare agents have often been degrading and racist encounters” (Maynard, 2016). For decades, Black families and communities have raised the alarm about the over-representation and treatment they have been subjected to (OHRC, 2018). A few of the individuals interviewed described their environments

as foreign, unfamiliar that took some time getting used to. Some advocated to be placed in an environment that represented them more. It is impossible to know the decision-making process that went into situating them at the time and for those who reported difficulties coming to terms with their identities, they grew to gain a better understanding of themselves. Perhaps more consideration in finding relatives or people in their communities. Having to transition from one home to another is a difficult experience to have to deal with and far too often, it has impacted education. For a child to stay in their community could potentially mitigate having to move too far to the point where they would have to completely readjust their life. If measures can be taken to ensure that children and families are involved and supported, that should include keeping intact activities of daily living that have already been established. 45 percent of Black children involved with the Children's Aid of Society of Toronto spent more than twelve months in care, twice as long as white or Asian youth (Contenta, Monsebraaten and Rankin, 2014). Very few of the stories presented were reunited with their families. Children and youth that had some semblance of communication with their family while in care, whether it be through visitations or events maintained a relationship afterwards. Child welfare agencies, though granted the power to remove children, do not address the systemic factors that lead to child removal (Maynard, 2016). Many of the stories chronicled a parent undergoing mental health conditions, for others abuse. It is troubling that with many situations, apprehension is the default response to the situation. What could be used as an opportunity to support a family in need results in a family separated from each other and in some cases, their cultural identity?

Cultural Identity and Identity Confusion when moved to Foster Care

With new policy changes in the Child, Youth and Family Services Act brought into effect in 2018, it would seem that many errors of the past were addressed after countless years. Some

of the relevant changes include making services more inclusive and culturally appropriate for all children and youth, including Indigenous and Black children and youth, to ensure every child receives the best possible support (Ministry of Children, Community and Social Services, 2017). In tandem, efforts would be made to increase race-based data collection. Agencies have incorporated anti-oppressive practices in their agencies for years but without data readily available, it was difficult to suggest that any change was occurring at a systemic level. An Ontario study found that service users who do not share the same set of cultural values, or have different backgrounds than case investigators were defined as different and risky within the child welfare system (Child Welfare Anti-Oppression Roundtable, 2009). According to the Ontario Anti Black racism strategy initiative, The Children's Aid Society of Toronto has taken steps to provide staff training on anti-Black racism and anti-oppression. They will review files related to Black children in care and identify patterns and themes that lead to disparity outcomes and highlight practices that best service Black communities. Felix (2016) questions the idea that it is a cultural misunderstanding that is to blame for the overrepresentation of Black children in child welfare. Cultural competence training she argues has not done anything to lower the number of Black children entering care. It was only recently that these changes in policy were made as a result of data that displayed a disproportionate number of Black children representing a majority of youth in care. It was only because of this information, information that came out of a study focusing on reported child abuse and neglect that substantiated claims Black families and communities stated for far too long that brought about a shift in the service being done. One Vision One Voice was a report released in 2016 identifying concerns African Canadians had in regards to service received from the Ontario welfare system and ways in which they could better

be served. Some of the projected outcomes are already in effect at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto.

Kevin Yarde, Anti-Black Racism Practice Lead at the Children's Aid Society spoke to the measures the agency is taking from within to combat Anti-Black Racism:

The Children's Aid Society is the only child welfare agency in North America that has anti-Black racism practice integration leads. There are six positions across the agency and collectively as a group our responsibility is to interrupt, to ensure that we're holding the agency accountable in terms of changing its relationship and accountability to the Black community. We're leading learning sessions where we're talking about implicit bias. Where we're talking about historical structural institutional racism and its impact on the Black community. We're talking about the importance of culture and identity.

With respect to culture and identity, it is no surprise that these aspects of life for children and youth are impacted when they enter care:

One of the six manifestations of Anti-Black racism is the integration of culture and identity. So, when we're bringing Black children and youth into care, we're cutting them off from their community. We're cutting them off from their family.

Judie Powell, Kinship Assessment Worker at the Children's Aid Society of Toronto speaks to Kinship Care and its impact on African, Black and Caribbean families and its importance:

Kinship impacts African, Black and Caribbean families because it allows for children to stay within their familial setting. It allows for children to have their nutritional needs met in terms of them understanding the food that is being put in front of them. It allows for their hygiene needs to be met whether it's through the skin care regimen for a lot of Black children which is very different from other races and cultures. It allows for children to be able to grow and continue being with people who know them. Whether that's going to be their grandmother or grandpa, whether that's their aunts or uncles, adult siblings or their cousins, it gives the child a sense of familiarity. It gives them a chance of belonging as opposed to if they were in a foster home where they may not understand what's going on. They may not understand the people that are around them. Just because it could be a racial matched foster home doesn't necessarily mean it's a cultural match and that cultural piece is just as important as the racial factor as well.

The kinship model being considered in treatment plans moving forward as a result of all of the potential benefits it is able to provide gives room for children and families a sense of stability and familiarity:

Having kinship allows for the alternative to foster care which has been at the forefront of part of the society's work over the years. To allow for the work to be done to keep children within their communities, within their cultures and within their race has been a huge factor and a huge part of the society's agenda moving forward and being able to work better with the Black community.

Anna Amy Ho, an ambassador at the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada came into care at the age of 13. She was raised by her brother who just turned 18 after a tragic event took place in her family.

My brother just turned 18 about a week after they passed away. He ended up becoming my guardian. I don't think any 18 year old knows how to become a parent overnight with no warning and little to no support so I think journey to zero, especially the kin and intensive support services for example through a kin searcher, assessor and its support services worker would have been able to help us find a relative, another family member or maybe even a community member to take us into their home and raise us both.

Anna is referring to the program Journey to Zero, a collaboration between the Children's Aid Society of Toronto and the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada with its sole priority to strengthen families while keeping children and youth at home or in their communities with the intention of keeping children out of the welfare system. Mahesh Prajapat has more to say on this initiative:

We were asked, if we can dream, what would we envision and we envisioned a system that did not protect children through investigation but a system that protected children by building family capacity and building family systems and where we fundamentally believe that children belong at home.

So, the zero represents the fact that we do not want to raise any children and we want to ensure that no children age out, out of care. The zero represents this notion of permanency that children should have permanency in their homes and in their families.

There will be cases where children and youth will not be able to stay in their home due to the severity of the situations that may present themselves. There are still many ways to preserve familiarity within the lives of children and youth that might have to relocate. Anna speaks to what would have helped her and her brother if there was a focus back then to assist families:

To create a family and community-based safety plan that involves accessing faith group supports, school supports or any other supports available in the community. My brother and I really didn't have those types of support and so I didn't feel well supported by the system at the time but I do know and believe that the Children's Aid Foundation of Canada and the Society of Toronto are really invested in helping families raise their own children rather than being taken into a system and being raised in a system by a system.

Soul Journey is a program for children and youth in care that are provided with an opportunity to explore and cultivate aspects of their culture through food, travel and historical destinations.

Initiated by Black employees, it is one way that keeps the youth in the system connected and aware of their cultural roots.

6. IMPLICATIONS

Themes pertaining to the lack of attention to the Family of Origin and the impact transitioning to foster placements can have to an individual's cultural identity were brought to light from the data gathered. Programs like Soul Journey and the Caring Dads program have the ability to rebuild connections between the family and culture that have for so long been absent. It is also necessary that anti-Black racism leads are in a position to oversee cases that take place and offer guidance and perspective. This is just a start to more initiatives that can benefit black children and families. In hearing many of the former youth in care retell their stories of having to navigate the system essentially on their own on top of coming to terms with respect to their identity is a lot for any person to have to deal with. More needs to be done in fostering a stable, familiar setting for children and families in the child welfare system. Far too often are black children at very young ages removed from familiar environments and are left with the responsibility of finding themselves on their own. This would not even particularly be an issue if there were still efforts being made to keep communication intact between the children and the family of origin but it seems that was rarely the case in the interviews and that needs to change. Furthermore, as black children become increasingly more aware of social inequities based on skin color and encounter prejudicial experiences, if there is little support to guide a child in understanding these issues, it can cause more harm in developing a positive self-image of themselves (Turner, 2016). It is vital that children are supported in developing a positive identity, especially in their formidable years where they may begin to notice or become exposed to racial barriers and inequality (Turner, 2016).

While interviews were gathered and documented in the form of blogs, there is room for further study. Through this online method the researcher can only guess which questions were

asked that elicited some of the responses. In addition, it is difficult to gather such information in harmony when there is no set foundation of questions to ask each individual. With that being said, opening the floor for the individual to share their experiences has the potential to create a platform that puts the researcher in the background, giving the floor to the participant to share what is on their heart. At the same time this is a useful exercise because the benefits from the research at face value would include individuals being able to voice their experiences. What this can do for others is voice concerns that others may have and broadcasting it on a wider scale. This can amplify other voices and give others that confidence to voice similar issues, concerns, successes. As a community, it is still fairly new in Ontario and more discussions need to be had from all involved and being able to hear one or two voices in the process is one or two voices more than before. To add to this, it is one of the reasons why there is a continued push for more race-based data. Child welfare institutions have all but recently showcased the numbers displaying the overrepresentation of black children in care. While the numbers are alarming, it is not surprising considering there has always been a suspicion and a call to action addressing the issue (Turner, 2016). The voices of the oppressed are important but sadly, are not as powerful as numerical data. These institutions have obligations to listen to the members of the communities they are serving and it might be a start to bring them to the table but even that in itself is almost doing a disservice. Their needs to be a staple, a fixture that is present in tackling these hard issues. It is not enough to hear how people are feeling and making decisions on their behalf. Service users of all stripes need to be involved at all levels.

With respect to some of the themes present in these accounts, a sense of safety and stability is what many sought in their placements. Whether it was in the care of foster or kin caregivers, safety and stability were markers when it came to healing and rehabilitation at an

individual level. Similar to Dill's (2010) findings, foster parents detailed how foster placements can provide love and stability just as effectively as kinship placements. The participants in Dill's research study expressed the strong desire to establish children with a sense of stability and permanency right at the forefront of their placement. Youth interviewed in Dill's research discussed moving from home to home before settling with a relative. Mitigating transitions is an important part of establishing stability for children in care. Far too often is the case for children in care, especially Black children to have experienced three or more moves compared with white children in care for an equivalent length of time (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1999). Some would argue that includes finding a home that reflects the child's cultural upbringing. Familiarity is an important component to factor in. Former youth in care expressed time and time again having to explain to peers about their living conditions the moment they were sighted with their foster parents. In some cases, divulging this information came with the stigma of children being in care which resulted in strained relationships for some. Many instances provided in the findings of this research showcased children who were apprehended, had no idea where they were going and throughout their journey, were provided with details after the fact. They were not included in the decision-making process and were not aware of decisions being made until the very last minute. It is not surprising that children would respond by choosing to withdraw from activities that matter to them when the very same activities are chosen by others without their consent. Dill also noted the absence of culture and identity that both foster and kin caregivers observed and the need to understand and contribute to that area of their life more effectively. Maintaining relationships with birth parents varied throughout these findings. In some instances, it was the decision of the child to cut ties with their birth parents. For others, it seemed that the steps taken to repair relationships were on the onus of the child,

with little support from agencies involved. There is a limitation that deserves to be further explored. Based on the approach to this research, questions pertaining to family reunification and the agency's role in that endeavour is a question worth asking. With the information provided, that is all that can be gathered at this time. With the examples provided, it seems that more could be done to cultivate relationships between children and their birth parents while they are in the care of foster and kin caregivers. A child should not be left wondering where their parents are or what has become of them after months and years in care. Children should not be left wondering how the rest of their family is doing or how they can get in touch with them. These avenues need to be more accessible as a whole. There seems to be a sense of the agency taking a step back to let families and communities raise their own but these communities still need financial and accessible supports geared to them.

With the information that has been divulged, more questions can be raised. For example, one could rightly ask, for which party is the kinship model a step in the right direction. Is it a step in the right direction for the agencies who no longer have to carry the weight and responsibility of raising children in care? What assistance if any are families that unexpectedly take on the role of a kin caregiver receiving for their efforts? For the parents of origin that have had their children removed from their care, what has their experience been like throughout the kinship process? The voices that are being heard and those voices that are still absent from the literature that is available to us needs to be considered in depth if this notion that kinship care as a practice really is in the best interests of the child when it comes to supporting and maintaining bonds.

It is also worth noting that there seemed to be a common understanding that family primarily focused on the immediate with not too much exploration outside of that. While many participants recognized family as more than immediate, it was not an area that could be expanded

on due to the limitations of the interviews. This view of family may have been the result of the limitations of the personal interviews conducted by and within the child welfare system.

Cultural identity is part of the resilience required to live in a white-dominated society. Other limitations involve the process of integrating kinship care. There was one instance where a former youth had to speak up and challenge her worker in order to provide her with a culturally sensitive placement but what was the process like for others. Was such a process even made available and did the parents have any say or input at all where their children would go? How was kinship care integrated in the care of Black children? Is this an option? If not, why? How do these stereotypes based on anti-Blackness interfere with parenting and community resiliency? These are aspects that were not covered because of the limitations of the interviews but questions worth considering for further research.

7. CONCLUSION

With the data present still quite limited and new policies just a few years old, it will take some time to see what change if any comes from the direction Children's Aid Societies like Toronto are taking to combat these disproportionate realities. Nonetheless, it is encouraging to see the steps they are taking in hopes that they could serve as an example of an agency that with humility, is willing to listen to communities they serve, bring them to the table to have their voices heard and reflect those voices in policies that would enact change for the primary purpose of seeing these communities thrive. Initiatives like state multiculturalism or other initiatives to tackle anti-oppression probably mean well but failure to pinpoint the intensity of racism to the extent that race disappears from open discourse only to carve a stronghold in covert cultural and institutional forms (Liu & Mills, 2006).

It is necessary to address anti-Black racism directly and potential biases is a step towards combating racism that has been able to manifest itself in language. The primary and secondary research analyzed, compared and contrasted to the literature, highlight concerns expressed from each of the individuals that shared their experiences in care. With a plethora of individual experiences, there will be common themes that will be shared amongst many and notable differences as well. These thoughts and feelings will support the notion that protection in the way that it has been done for decades has had negative impacts on the very individuals they are seeking to protect. These findings reveal the necessity of fostering and nurturing culture, identity, family and community in the lives of children who find themselves in the child welfare system. The lack of attention to these areas is what has been described by many voices interviewed and it is encouraging to hear that in the responses of the service providers interviewed, that they are areas being addressed through programs and initiatives to incorporate such practices in the lives

of service users. It simply is not enough to step back and let communities run the show as there has been a lot of damage done. There is still opportunity for child welfare agencies to be seen in a different light that offer accessible services and programs tailored to assist Black families in need. Work is also being done within the agency to combat anti-Black racism among service users and staff as well. While there is much being done in the Children's Aid Society of Toronto, can the same be said for other child welfare agencies across Ontario? Breaking down negative stereotypes while creating a more culturally sensitive infrastructure that recognizes the value of kinship care models may play an integral role in strengthening Black families in the child welfare system. The steps that the Children's Aid Society of Toronto are taking to improve the lives of Black families may serve as an example for other agencies down the road. Time will tell.

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