

The U.S. child welfare system refers to a set of laws and government agencies mandated to protect and support victims of child abuse and neglect, collectively referred to as “child maltreatment.” Under the current system, government agencies receive reports with claims of child maltreatment, investigate those claims, determine if they believe abuse or neglect occurred, and often remove children from their homes and place them into the physical and/or legal custody of the state.

The “front end” of the child welfare system is a series of decision points between an initial report of suspected child abuse or neglect and a child’s removal from their home.

REPORTING

In 2020, U.S. child welfare agencies received a total of **3.9 million reports** involving **7.1 million children**. An overwhelming **65.7 percent of these reports** came from law enforcement personnel and “helping professionals,” including educational, medical, social services, and mental health personnel. At this stage, Black children are **reported twice as often** as white children.

SCREENING

After evaluating whether the allegations of child maltreatment met statutory definitions of abuse or neglect in 2020, agencies **screened out 45.8 percent of reports** and **screened in 54.2 percent of reports** for further investigation. At the screening stage, Black children are between **two and five times** more likely to have their cases screened in for investigation than white children.

INVESTIGATION

During investigations, Child Protective Services (“CPS”) and/or law enforcement conduct interviews, assessments, home visits, and various background checks to determine whether allegations of child maltreatment are substantiated. Current estimates indicate that before turning eighteen, **37.4 percent of all children**, including **53 percent of Black children**, in the U.S. will be subjected to a CPS investigation.

SUBSTANTIATION

Despite the common misconception that most maltreatment cases involve abuse, **76.1 percent of substantiated maltreatment reports** in 2020 involved allegations of “neglect.” In contrast, physical abuse constituted 16.5 percent, sexual abuse constituted 9.4 percent, and sex trafficking constituted 0.2 percent of substantiated maltreatment reports. Importantly, an estimated **18.4 percent of Black children** and **15.8 percent of Native American** will have a substantiated maltreatment case before they turn eighteen, compared to **11 percent of white children**.

REMOVAL

Every 2.5 minutes, a child in the U.S. is separated from their families and placed in foster care, too often with a stranger. In 2020, **approximately 64% of all children, including 64% of Black children and 65% of Native American children**, removed from their families experienced family separation because of “neglect.” Under the current system, “neglect” removals often result from conditions of poverty, including “inadequate housing” or “failure to provide adequate nutrition.” Research indicates that Black children are **15% more likely** than white children to be separated from their families instead of receiving in-home services after an investigation.

