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A **SECOND CHANCE** INC.



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**The scene unfolding on the United States-Mexico
border continues to be tough to watch.**

The Current Immigration Crisis and America's Legacy of Punishing Poor Black and Brown Children

By Sharon L. McDaniel, MPA, Ed.D.

Even as immigration policies shift, it remains unclear how the more than 2,000 children wrenched from their parents and swept into warehouses, cages and chaos will be reunited with family. Immigrant mothers and fathers have risked it all, but now many have even fewer ways to keep their families safe — and together. The U.S. continues to punish the children of the poor, black and brown.

I know this first-hand. I am an African-American woman who grew up in the child welfare system, an experience that gives me a unique view into the country's latest immigration crisis. It is a harsh reminder that when parents make mistakes, or they struggle, children pay the price.

That's what happened to me. When I was 2, my mother died, leaving my father to raise three young children. He tried but couldn't do it. This was the early 1960s, and the child welfare system had little to offer a black father in search of a way forward for his family. The system then — and still now — criminalizes black and poor families and labels them the problem. They are rarely seen as the ones who possess strengths and solutions to make their families whole.

But it is possible. Unlike most in foster care, my caregivers weren't strangers; they were close family friends — people who were like kin. They were my safety net.

In 1994, I opened A Second Chance, Inc., a Pittsburgh-based kinship care agency that specializes in reuniting children with family. I wanted to replicate the kinship care I found. Over the years, the agency has served more than 25,000 families and I know that a host of supports for families and communities on the margins can provide needed safety nets and loving care to uprooted children.

At age 13, when I clashed with my fictive grandparents, the child welfare system offered little support to these loving, retired caregivers who needed help parenting a teenager in the 1970s. As a consequence, I spent a few months in a group home while I waited to be placed with other members of my kinship network. It was no substitute for family.

Decades later, not much has changed. The use of group homes, like the one

that housed me, may have decreased over the years, but recent reports of youth detention centers on the border show that they are still very much a part of the U.S. child welfare system: [one in eight](#) foster children live in an institutional setting. For many, these institutions are commonly used as a first, rather than a last, resort when children and youth can no longer live with their parents. In this country, the practice of removing children of color and those who are disadvantaged from their parents, homes and communities has deep roots. For African-American children, the practice dates back to slavery. Today, most of the children who are placed in these institutions still look like me — black.

But the racial dynamics of such separation can be traced to the 1700s, to the birth of American orphanages. For most youngsters, their race and low socio-economic status made them orphans, even when they had one or both living parents. In the 1870s, the country's policy of assimilation ordered the removal of Native American children from their families and reservations to prison-like boarding schools. By the 1950s, this system of care had been replaced by the current foster care model — and was given a name change, from orphanage to group home.

Then, like now, forcibly removing children from their parents and placing them in group homes, detention centers and tent cities inflicts trauma that is real and can be lasting. Two grim reminders are the African children and families pulled away from each other during slavery and the U.S. internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II.

As a kinship care provider, my work is informed by an arsenal of literature on how such trauma affects a child's brain and development. And as a former child of the system, I experienced this trauma. Toxic stress and trauma that occur early on and frequently can cause adverse health experiences, including early deaths. The immigration maelstrom occurring at our border has brought needed attention to childhood trauma and the neuroscience behind it. For African-American and poor children who are growing up in toxic environments, the problem is exacerbated. Their involvement in the child welfare system itself induces personal trauma.

In recent weeks, the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American College of Physicians and the American Psychiatric Association have all issued statements against the forced separation of immigrant families.

“To pretend that separated children do not grow up with the shrapnel of this traumatic experience embedded in their minds is to disregard everything we know about child development, the brain, and trauma,” reads a [petition](#) from mental health professionals.

I agree. This is the same kind of trauma that the estimated 438,000 children in foster care experience every day in the United States. We must respond to the urgent needs and growing number of all children being separated from their parents and warehoused or institutionalized. After all, providing care to those in need is inherent in our American values.

This latest immigration furor is not only a clarion call for the overhaul of domestic and immigration policies that this country must make to support families, but also for re-negotiating child welfare and public policies that impact the lives of all children. While there is no easy fix, one thing is certain, these new policies must value families, not punish them for being poor, vulnerable or people of color. – **Dr. McDaniel** is *the founder, president and CEO of A Second Chance, Inc.* and is the author of “On My Way Home – A Memoir of Kinship, Grace, and Hope.” ([This piece](#) was originally published in [The Chronicle of Social Change](#).)

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CONN: [Malloy: DCF A National Child Welfare Model](#)

ND: [Dual Status Youth Initiative rolls out recommendations](#)

NATIONAL: [For children growing up in the shadow of the opioid crisis, public schools have become the safety net of last resort.](#)

NC: [Future uncertain for thousands of NC children in group homes](#)

International News

UK: [1.6 million children in serious risk households left to 'fend for themselves', finds report](#)



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