

Youth Safety **MUST** Remain Paramount:

The Risks of Racism, Discrimination, and Implicit Bias

When I was a child, I used to wish that somebody, anybody, would stop by my house and witness the abuse that my siblings and I were experiencing – but it never happened.

It took years of self-advocacy to get my siblings and I to a place of safety.



1. Background

Ohio foster youth recently met state leadership to share concerns about youth calling county hotlines to report experiencing abuse and not being taken seriously. Concerns were expressed by youth that:

- Numbers reduction must not come at the expense of child and teen safety
- To refuse to take a youth into protective care because of their race is racism
- To delay or deny foster care services based on race is discriminatory
- Bias towards separating families unnecessarily cannot then be replaced with not listening to youth who experience abuse
- ***Extremist approaches can lead to prolonged abuse, increased trauma, and loss of life***

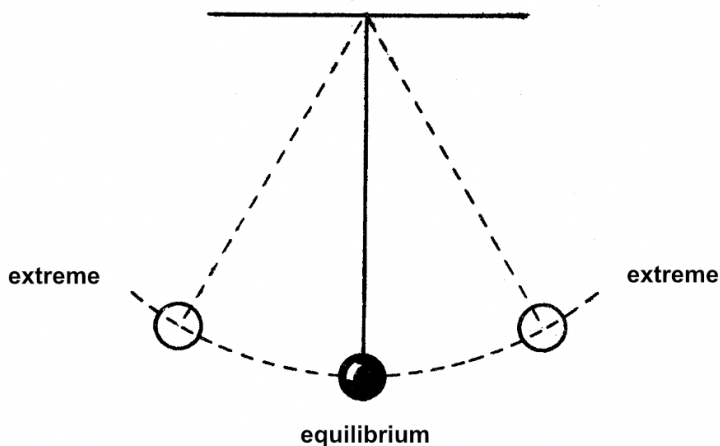
The OHIO YAB and ACTION Ohio are likewise ***concerned by any proposals to eliminate national safeguards that exist to protect the lives of all youth***, such as amending or repealing the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act or the Adoption and the Safe Families Act.

“Reduction of the number of youth in foster care might look good on paper, but it can also mean less awareness of abuse.

“It can mean that the abuse is not being reported or that a young person who is experiencing abuse is not being listened to. This is extremely dangerous.”

~ Quote from an OHIO YAB Youth Ambassador

Pendulum swing: The tendency of systems to oscillate between one extreme and another



- This occurs in other fields as well, such as special education: mainstreaming, phonics vs. whole language, etc.)

- Please do seek to address racial disproportionality in foster care, but do not do so at the expense of the safety of minority children and teens.

2. Pendulum Swing

This term is used to describe the tendency of systems to oscillate between one extreme and another. This can be seen in various fields of study, including education. Child welfare is not exempt from this dangerous phenomenon.

As one youth leader stated, *“When it comes to child welfare, we are trying so hard to move forward that we are moving backwards in some ways. The risk is for this to lead to a dangerous overcorrection in which the system doesn’t want to take youth into care at all.”*

One way to avoid the pendulum swing and ensure child and teen protection is to **make the system youth-centered**: *“Make it about the youth themselves: their safety, their welfare and their best interest. Rather than the parents’ property interest in their children.”*

3. Racism

Ohio youth leaders could not stress this strongly enough:

To refuse to listen to a youth who is asking to be removed from an abusive placement because of their race is racism

This is about child safety, not keeping numbers down.



There is nothing more terrifying and soul-shattering than to be a young person experiencing abuse, and to try to speak out about it, and have your voice not be heard.

I know this from personal experience.

Recent real-life examples from Ohio youth:

- *African American male teen calls hotline four separate times to report physical abuse, sexual abuse and abandonment. Each time, caseworker told the teen, “We are not going to take you into foster care.”*
- *African American female teen reports being raped and becoming pregnant by a family member. Her siblings call the child abuse hotline, as does the local children’s hospital. Her parents are required to attend parenting classes. No measures are taken to protect her from the continuation of sexual abuse.*

4. Discrimination

It is discriminatory not to take an African American child or teen into foster care based on wanting to avoid disproportionality. This is putting political correctness over child safety.

The young person is literally being **denied or delayed in receiving the benefit of protection** based on their skin color. They are being treated differently to their disadvantage and given disparate treatment to their detriment.

What is discrimination?

“Different treatment that makes a distinction of one person or group of persons from others, either intentionally, by neglect, or by actions or lack of actions

The 4 Ds

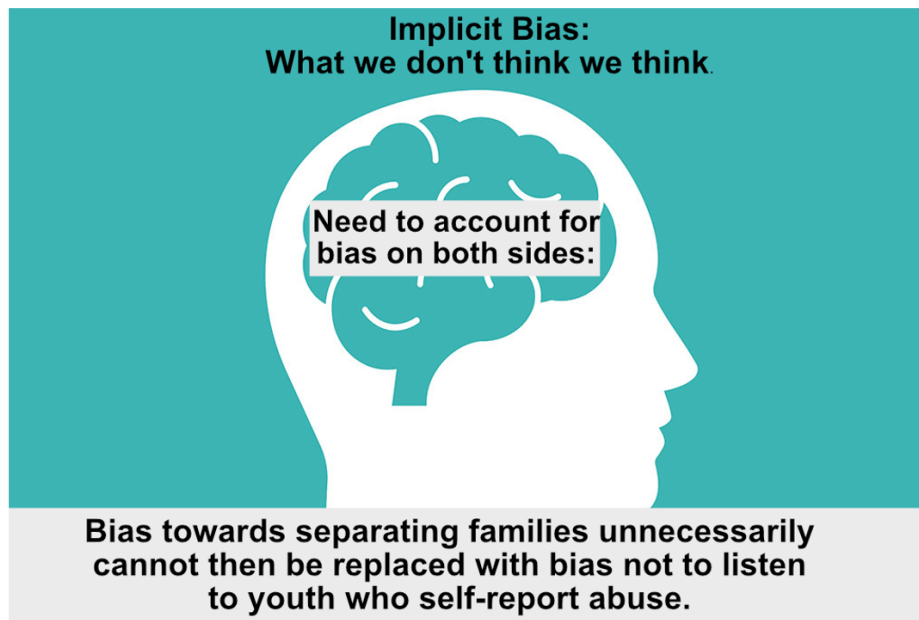
- Denied benefits
- Delayed benefits
- Treated Differently
- Given Disparate treatment

An action is considered discriminatory if an individual or group is:

- *Denied benefits* that others received
- *Delayed in receiving* benefits or services that others received
- *Treated differently* than others, to their disadvantage
- *Given disparate treatment*, meaning that an action might not seem discriminatory but has a discriminatory impact in practice

5. Implicit Bias

Implicit bias can go both ways and create a systemic impact and systemic harm. Bias toward separating families unnecessarily cannot be replaced by refusing to listen to youth who report being abused. The bottom line needs to be youth safety: Is the child or teen being abused or not?



6. Addressing Disproportionality Without Sacrificing the Safety of Youth

Rather than proposing to overturn the very national safeguards that exist to protect children and teens from being abused or from languishing for years in foster care, why not pursue the following courses of action?



Also referred to as “differential response,” alternative response can be utilized by child protective agencies to help families access support, services and resources, as a means to resolve concerns when a report is made without requiring a formal investigation. However, in cases when a young person is experiencing sexual abuse, abuse resulting in serious injury, and whenever children are determined to be in serious and immediate risk of harm, a traditional response is required. *As current and former foster youth, many of whom have personally survived abusive situations, we reiterate that: “Youth safety must be prioritized.”*

It's also important to note that disproportionality within the foster care system does not exist within a vacuum. Our nation's housing, education, healthcare and policing systems are overshadowed by a history of racial inequities and racist practices. Addressing those structural issues will help improve outcomes for families of color.

Results of 2021 Case Western Study

- Cuyahoga County's rate of confirmed abuse or neglect-related child deaths is significantly higher than the national average.
- Black and Brown children are disproportionately victimized.
- A suspected history of child abuse or neglect is a risk factor for child homicides, and yet early warning signs are too often missed by providers.

7. Youth Safety is Paramount

Mandated reporting is an important part of avoiding loss of life. Prior to March 19, 2019, Ohio was the only state in the nation that didn't include police officers on its list of mandated reporters. Led by the voices of those with "lived experience," our state moved forward to make municipal and county police officers mandatory reporters of abuse and neglect.

Ohio foster care youth and alumni recently advocated for the establishment of a statewide Youth Ombudsman Office. We are currently seeking to remove running away as a status offense, because the most common reason youth give for running away is to escape abuse. Youth who go missing for longer periods of time, and who travel farthest away, are most likely to have been abused previously.

Today's vulnerable children and teens deserve a balanced, thoughtful and intentional approach that prioritizes their safety. Now is not the time for reactionary response. We want to go on record to express objections and concerns regarding the proposal to repeal national safeguards that exist to safeguard youth from abuse.



The ***Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board (OHIO YAB)*** is a statewide organization of young people (ages 14-24) who have experienced foster care. The OHIO YAB exists to be the knowledgeable statewide voice that influences policies and practices that impact youth who have or will experience out of home care.

Alumni of Care Together Improving Outcomes Now Ohio (ACTION Ohio) is dedicated to improving outcomes for current and former foster care youth. ACTION Ohio initiatives include Thanksgiving Together and Three Days on the Hill.