CHAPIN HALL

Chapin Hall Literature Review

Best Practices for Supporting African American Families & Preventing Child Welfare Involvements

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This review bridges research and practice, offering culturally responsive, evidence-backed approaches to strengthen Black families and prevent unnecessary family separation.

Evidence indicates that child welfare involvement can result in trauma for children and families and lead to lasting emotional and psychological harm (Doyle, 2007; Sankaran et al., 2018; Sariaslan et al., 2022). Nationally, "Black" or "African American"[1] children are persistently overrepresented in the child welfare system relative to their share of the general population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). They experience higher rates of child maltreatment reporting, investigation, and substantiation; placement into foster care; and length of stay in foster care compared to other children (Dettlaff & Boyd, 2020).

Disparate and disproportionate[2] child welfare outcomes among Black children underscore the urgent need to identify, understand, and implement effective strategies to support Black children and their families. In response to this need, we reviewed the literature on best practices and approaches to support African American families and prevent child welfare involvement, particularly those that strengthen families and keep them connected. In this brief, we provide relevant background, describe the methods used for our review, summarize evidence-based strategies, discuss limitations, and present recommendations.

The central research question guiding this work is: What are the best practices to support African American children and their families to prevent unnecessary child welfare involvement? The findings of our review are organized into the following core domains:

Economic and Concrete Supports. Evidence shows the positive impact of an array of economic and concrete supports in preventing child maltreatment and child removal. In this review, the following strategies are elevated as being protective for African American children and their families:

- Income supports
- Housing supports
- Flexible funds to meet concrete needs
- Child care

[1] The terms "Black" and "African American" are used interchangeably throughout this publication which aligns with the U.S. Census Bureau's classification of this population. Using these terms interchangeably also acknowledges that not all individuals who identify as African American also identify as Black, and vice versa. The authors affirm the right of individuals to self-identify and use both terms in recognition of that diversity. We also acknowledge that other ethnic and cultural identities might not be included within the terminology of Black and African American, such as Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latine.

[2] In this review, disparity refers to unequal outcomes of one racial or ethnic group compared with outcomes for another racial or ethnic group. Disproportionality refers to the overrepresentation or underrepresentation of a racial or ethnic group compared with its percentage in the total population (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021).

Family Engagement and Preservation Strategies. Collaborative partnerships that actively involve African American families in decision-making and use a strengths-based approach are associated with enhanced safety, permanency, and stability. Preservation approaches for Black families include:

- Centering cultural assets
- Family Team Conferencing
- Parent supports and cultural brokers
- Kinship caregiving models
- Navigation
- Sibling preservation

Culturally Responsive Services. Culturally competent interventions are most successful when designed in partnership with community, specifically when those community members most likely to benefit from these services and programs shape and affirm the intervention as meaningful and beneficial in their lives. Effective culturally responsive services for Black children and their families include:

- ParentPowered
- Effective Black Parenting Program
- Promoting Strong African American Families

Child Welfare Practice. It is important that child welfare case workers understand the underlying causes of why different racial and ethnic groups are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, are able to critically examine data disaggregated by race and ethnicity, and are equipped with tools to prevent African American children from being oversurveilled and inequitably identified as at-risk, reported to child welfare, and removed. Evidence-informed practices include:

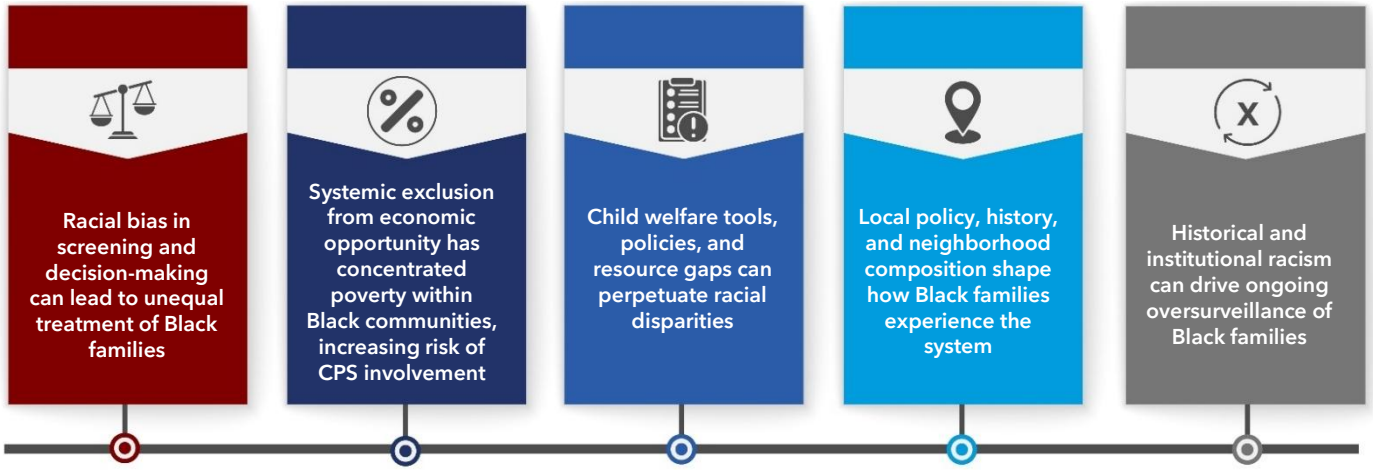
- Cultural competency training
- Routine analysis of disaggregated data
- Using predictive risk model tools that do not exacerbate bias and surveillance

This literature review presents a comprehensive array of best practices and strategies to enhance the well-being of African American families, promote culturally affirming child welfare practices, and prevent unnecessary family separation. Ultimately this review bridges research and practice, offering culturally responsive, evidenced-backed approaches that can be integrated into daily practices to strengthen supports for Black families and prevent child welfare involvement. This review also illuminates critical gaps where the field must continue to grow.

DISPROPORTIONALITIES AND DISPARITIES IN THE U.S. CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Research indicates several factors may contribute to racial and ethnic disproportionalities and disparities among children involved with the child welfare system (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). The list below highlights some of these factors.

Figure 1. Factors Driving Racial Disparities in Child Welfare



- People who work with children, such as case workers and mandated reporters, may exhibit individual racial bias, prejudice, and discrimination, resulting in biased screening and decision-making practices. Some research suggests that Black children face a higher likelihood of foster care placement compared to White children, even when risk profiles are similar (Huggins-Hoyt et al., 2019; Kelly & Varghese, 2018).
- Structural and systemic barriers have contributed to disproportionately high rates of poverty among children of color, which may place them at greater risk of becoming involved with the child welfare system (Dettlaff et al., 2021). According to data from 2024, 25.4% of Black children were living in poverty, compared to 8.2% of non-Hispanic White children (Shrider & Bijou, 2023). Financial hardship stemming from discrimination and exclusion from employment, educational, and financial opportunities have also resulted in concentrated poverty within communities of color (Feely & Bosk, 2021). Between 2019 and 2023, 1 in 5 Black children (20%) lived in "high-poverty" areas, compared to 8% of children nationally (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025). Communities with concentrated poverty have been associated with higher rates of child welfare investigations linked to neglect (Feely & Bosk, 2021; Fong, 2019).
- Child welfare institutional policy and practices can contribute to racial disproportionality and disparities. This might include, for example, risk assessment tools, inconsistencies in child removal practices, mandatory reporting laws, organizational culture, and a lack of resources for families of diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds.

- Geographic context (for example, rural or urban, state or neighborhood) is another factor. Differences in disproportionality and disparity across geographies may reflect variations in child welfare policy and practice, historical circumstances, and a range of community factors found in specific regions across the country (Fluke et al., 2011). One study found that African American, Hispanic, and White children living in diverse neighborhoods are more likely to be reported to child protective services (CPS) than children of the same race or ethnicity living in homogenous neighborhoods (Klein & Merritt, 2014).
- Structural racism (for example, historical, cultural, and institutional factors that maintain inequality) has also contributed to racial disproportionality and disparities. Oversurveillance of African American families within and outside of the child welfare system has perpetuated racial inequities over time (Lauritzen et al., 2018; Sawyer et al., 2025; Thomas et al., 2023).

We acknowledge the root causes and historical inequities that may be driving the overrepresentation of African American families in the child welfare system.[3] While Black children represent approximately 14% of the U.S. child population, they account for approximately 23 – 25% of the foster care population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2025; Pew Research Center, 2026). At the national level, Black children and youth are more likely than other children to be removed from their homes and, once involved with child welfare, they experience disparate outcomes (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2021). For African American youth who age out of foster care, 23% experience homelessness and 29% experience incarceration. These are far higher rates than for non-Black youth (Children's Rights & Columbia Law School Human Rights Institute, 2022; U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Administration for Children and Families, 2026).

Figure 2. Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being Framework

We would like to offer a strength- and asset-based lens through which to view family support. The Vital Conditions for Health and Well-Being framework (see Figure 1) identifies key elements needed for communities to thrive and create wealth (The Rippel Foundation, n.d.). Historically, people of color in the U.S. have been systematically denied opportunities that are vital to health, wealth, and well-being, resulting in long-term inequities (Bailey et al., 2017; Braveman et al., 2022; Thomas & Waldfogel, 2022).

As a result, multidisciplinary professionals—including legal scholars, medical and public health practitioners, social workers, and researchers—advocate for comprehensive child welfare system reform and a fundamental shift from punitive, surveillance-based responses to preventative family strengthening approaches (Burton & Montauban, 2021; Campbell et al., 2023; Dishion et al., 2016).

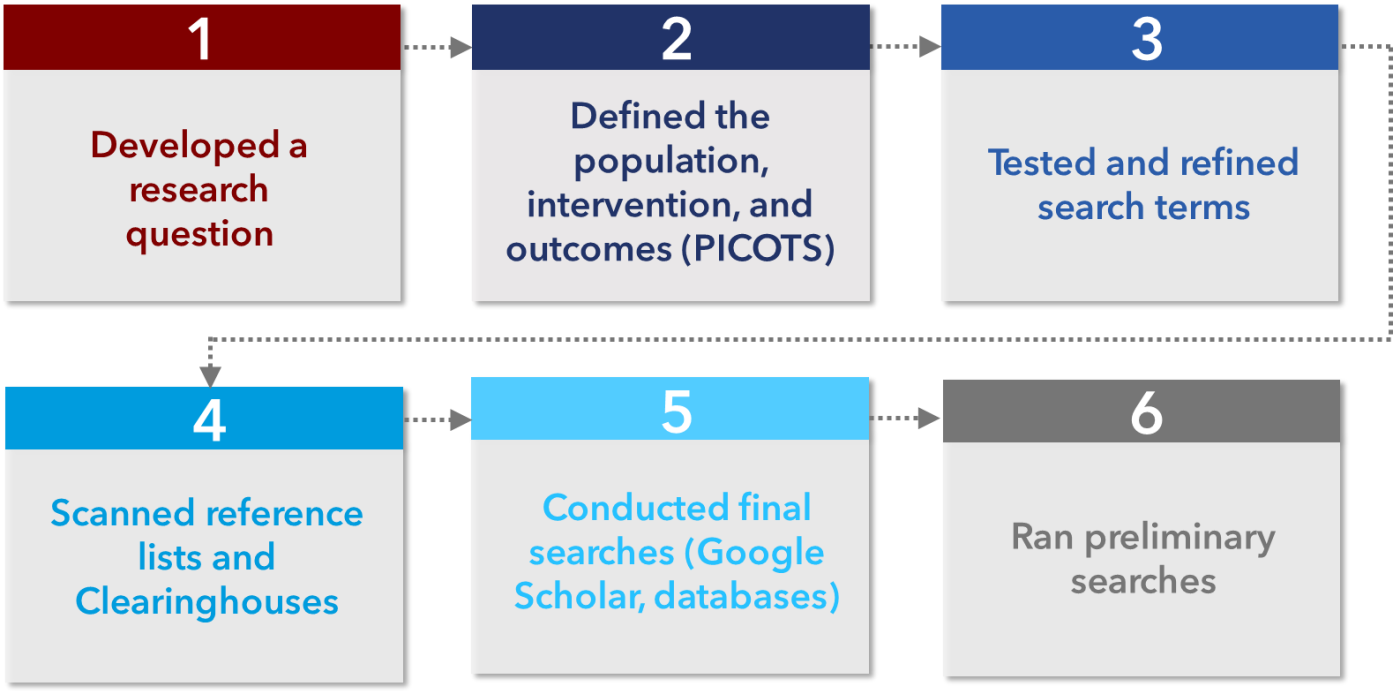
[3] While this review focuses on Black or African American children, we are aware that other groups, including American Indians and Alaska Natives (AI/AN), are also disproportionately impacted by the child welfare system. We also acknowledge that there are other ethnic and cultural identities that might not be included within the terminology of Black and African American such as Afro-Caribbean and Afro-Latine.

Addressing persistent racial and ethnic disproportionality and disparities in the child welfare system requires that Black families and other families of color have equitable access to a continuum of strength-based, culturally responsive and community-centered services and supports.

This literature review highlights evidence-informed interventions, approaches, and programs to strengthen African American families and communities and reduce the number of children being separated from their families.

METHODS

To guide our literature review we conducted the following process (Snyder, 2019)



This review aims to address the research question: What are the best practices, strategies, and approaches to prevent unnecessary child welfare involvement among African American families?

Table 1 shows key terms that align with the Population, Intervention, Comparison, Outcome, Timing and Setting Framework (PICOTS), which was used to identify the key search terms for the search strategy. We acknowledge that mental health, substance use, and intimate partner violence/domestic violence are drivers of child welfare involvement (Bosk et al., 2022). These specific topics were not included in the search strategy given the scope of this review; however, approaches to address these challenges are included in the findings.

Table 1. Eligibility Criteria Using the PICOTS Framework

PICOTS Element	Eligibility Criteria and Search Terms
Population	African American/Black children, African American/Black parents or caregivers, African American/Black families, Black Americans, Afro American, minority, vulnerable populations, child/youth (age 18 or under)
Intervention (policy, project, resource, or program)	culturally relevant, strengths-based, evidence-based, family strengthening, asset-based, parenting, parent-child interaction, family preservation, family engagement, family support, family-centered practice, in-home services, family crisis, home-based services, safety, child welfare, economic support, concrete support, public benefit programs, public welfare, assessment, navigation
Outcomes	prevention of child welfare, family stability, economic insecurity, financial stability, prevention of child maltreatment and neglect, prevention of out-of-home placement, child protection, family strengthening, family preservation, reunification, family stabilization, permanency
Timing	Literature published in or after 1978
Setting	Implemented in the United States; programs or interventions that focus on culturally appropriate strategies for Black/African American families

The literature in this review includes randomized controlled trials, quasi-experimental study designs, reports, evaluations, and grey literature. Additional efforts were made to include articles and reports that prioritize the work and voices of authors of color, diverse research teams, and other minoritized and racialized groups (Lett et al., 2022). Approximately 300 records from the literature were identified through the literature search. Of these, a total of 54 records were reviewed and informed the findings, though additional records are cited throughout this report.[4]

KEY FINDINGS

In this section, we summarize key strategies and practices identified in our literature review that will likely have the most impact on strengthening Black families and preventing child welfare involvement. We include upstream prevention efforts and approaches that prioritize family strengths and assets. The findings are organized into four core domains: (1) economic and concrete supports, (2) family engagement and preservation strategies, (3) culturally responsive services, and (4) child welfare practices.

[4] Perplexity AI was used to identify source material and support minor editing in this document. All content has been independently verified by the authors.

Economic and Concrete Supports

The relationship between family economic hardship and risk for child welfare involvement is well established in the literature, underscoring the importance of addressing the concrete needs of families (Bywaters et al., 2022; Conrad-Hiebner & Byram, 2020; Skinner et al., 2023). Families experiencing material hardship—such as difficulty paying for child care, housing, food, or medical care—have an elevated risk for child welfare involvement (Cai, 2022; Kim & Henly, 2021; Yang, 2015). Evidence shows the positive impact of an array of economic and concrete supports (ECS) on reducing risk for child maltreatment, involvement with CPS, removal of children and placement into foster care, and significant injury or death due to maltreatment (Cusick et al., 2024; Forston et al., 2016). Examples of ECS that have been found to be protective for families are shown in Figure 2.

Figure 3. Examples of Economic and Concrete Supports

Chapin Hall's systematic review on the effectiveness of ECS—which included only studies that met rigorous eligibility criteria consistent with the standards of the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse—found that ECS have a causal effect on reducing child maltreatment and child welfare involvement (Cusick et al., 2024; Wilson et al., 2024). Regardless of delivery mechanism, there is consistent, favorable evidence of the impact of programs and services that provide ECS on child welfare outcomes. These findings point toward the need for coordinated policy and practice shifts that encourage using preventive strategies and interventions focused on resourcing families to alleviate economic and material hardship, in addition to addressing safety (Cusick et al., 2024).

As discussed above, African American families experience inequities in income, wealth, and resource access (Aladangady et al., 2023), and disproportionately face employment and economic insecurity due to longstanding systemic conditions (Dettlaff et al., 2021). Hence, approaches that prioritize meeting families' concrete needs not only address child maltreatment risk factors but may also reduce persistent racial disparities across the child welfare continuum. However, ensuring that families have equitable access to ECS is critical. For instance, while it has been shown that increased state spending on public benefit programs is associated with a reduction in child welfare involvement and foster care placements (Puls et al., 2021), inequities in eligibility and access to these programs may reduce the beneficial impact for Black children (Puls et al., 2024).

Income Supports

There is strong evidence of the effectiveness of income support policies on reducing risk for child maltreatment and child welfare involvement (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2024). For example, direct income transfers made to families who are low income consistently demonstrate reductions in child welfare involvement (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2024).

A simulation study analyzing the effects of three anti-poverty policy packages (National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, & Medicine, 2019)[5] on household income found that implementing these packages could reduce CPS investigations by 11 to 20% annually. Importantly, implementation would substantially reduce racial disproportionality in CPS involvement, with up to a 29% reduction in investigations for Black children compared to a 13% reduction in investigations for White children (Pac et al., 2023).

Housing Supports and Eviction Prevention

Research indicates that housing supports are important child welfare prevention strategies for African American families. Housing insecurity is a risk factor for child welfare involvement (Chandler et al., 2022; Bullinger & Fong, 2020), and it is estimated that inadequate housing contributes to the risk of entering foster care for 1 out of every 6 children involved in CPS investigations (Fowler et al., 2013). Promising housing interventions for families include rapid, transitional, and supportive housing (see Figure 4), with the strongest evidence around permanent housing subsidies and supportive housing programs to prevent foster care entry (Dworsky, 2014; Farrell et al., 2018; Gubits et al., 2018).

Figure 4. Housing Interventions for Families

Evictions in the United States disproportionately impact Black renters. Despite making up 18.6% of renters, Black renters represent 51.1% of households that receive eviction threats, and 43.4% of households that are evicted (Graetz et al., 2023). The risk is especially high for Black women renters with children, who comprise 28.3% of the average annual rate for eviction filings and 12% of those evicted, the highest of any race and gender group (Graetz et al., 2023). Therefore, eviction protections such as emergency rental assistance and legal support may be key preventative supports to reduce risk factors for child welfare involvement and foster care entry for African American families.

[5] The three anti-poverty packages included in this analysis were: (1) expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, plus universal monthly child allowance; (2) expansion of Earned Income Tax Credit, Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, Housing Choice Voucher Program and SNAP; and (3) expansion of Earned Income Tax Credit and Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, increase in federal minimum wage (to $10.25/hour) plus monthly child allowance.

Flexible Funds for Concrete Supports

Minnesota's Parent Support Outreach Program (PSOP) is an upstream prevention program for families in Minnesota who are not currently involved with CPS but who are at risk for future involvement with the system. PSOP provides short-term voluntary services to families experiencing multiple risk factors, including poverty, homelessness, or mental health concerns.

Flexible funds for concrete supports to address family stressors and meet basic needs is a key component of the program (Minnesota Management & Budget, Impact Evaluation Unit, 2025). Most households who receive PSOP services include at least one person who identifies as Black or a person of color. Data show that over 90% of children remain with their families within 3 years of their involvement in PSOP services (Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families, 2025). Recent analysis[6] indicates that African American families comprised 29% of PSOP cases (between 2014 and 2024) and experienced fewer child welfare outcomes compared to white families (Minnesota Management & Budget, Impact Evaluation Unit, 2025).

Child Care

Research demonstrates that increased access to child care and child care assistance is associated with reduced risk for child welfare involvement (Barr et al., 2025). One study examined the impact of child care subsidies on substantiated child maltreatment reports among a sample of which 80% were Black families living with low income. It found evidence that child care subsidies are protective against child physical abuse and neglect (Yang et al., 2019). Access to child care may be a particularly important support for African American families given the high percentage of Black children living in single mother-headed households.

According to 2023 data, while 21% of all mothers in the United States were single mothers, 47% of African American mothers were single mothers (Salas-Betsch, 2024). Moreover, emerging research indicates that access to a universal pre-kindergarten program in New York City was associated with reductions in CPS involvement, especially for neglect investigations, and that these reductions had the greatest impact among Black children in the 2 years following program implementation (Hong et al., 2026).

Family Engagement and Preservation Strategies

Family engagement and preservation strategies are grounded in collaborative partnerships. At the core of these partnerships are practices that honor families' strengths and assets, and values and expertise, while actively engaging families in decision making (Toros et al., 2018). This asset-based approach builds mutual trust and reciprocity between child welfare workers and families and bolsters child safety, permanency, and well-being. Prioritizing family engagement and preservation strategies through evidence-based approaches can reduce unnecessary family separation and out-of-home placement.

Centering Cultural Assets with the Family Cultural Wealth Survey

The Family Cultural Wealth Survey is a trusted tool that centers and assesses the cultural strengths of African American families with young children. Modelled on the seminal work of an African American sociologist and a Chicana critical race theorist, this tool uniquely and intentionally maps cultural assets that African American families access during times of duress, elevating cultural wealth instead of a deficit model (Iruka et al., 2025).

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[6] This descriptive analysis draws on administrative and survey data to provide an analysis of PSOP implementation and participant characteristics. It is not designed to make claims of cause and effect, and the findings should be interpreted as a description of PSOP participants and their experiences.

The survey measures and validates families' strengths, resources, and cultural assets, creating mutual trust between practitioners and families. It positions families as valued partners in supporting children's development and learning.

One study found that while families' cultural wealth was associated with improved parental capacity to cope with discrimination and emotional struggles, it was not associated with improved child externalizing behavior issues. This suggests that additional supports may be needed for African American parents of children with behavior issues. While evidence pertaining to the use of this tool is limited, the importance of understanding Black families' cultural assets and integrating these assets into services and programs is critical to promote and sustain family well-being (Lloyd et al., 2022). Core domains of the model that, when combined, demonstrate cultural wealth are shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Domains of Cultural Wealth (as described in the Family Cultural Wealth Survey)

Family Team/Group Conferencing[7]

The concept of family team conferencing originated in New Zealand and has been used successfully in the United States to meaningfully involve parents as decision makers regarding their family's safety and care plan (Schreier et al., 2019). Evaluations on the use of family team meetings found that the meetings help families feel more connected and involved in decision-making (Robinson et al., 2009). For example, when this model was implemented in Miami, families reported feeling involved and strong connections were formed between child welfare counselors, courts, and families. For families who participated in family team conferences, 53% of children returned home within 6 months following the conference (Robinson et al., 2009). Among the children who did not return home, 72% were placed with relatives (Robinson et al., 2009). Some examples in the literature have found that frequent and longer family team meetings did not improve caregiver stress, especially for families learning to navigate their children's complex behavioral and emotional needs (Schreier et al., 2019).

[7] Family team conferencing is sometimes called family team meetings. These terms are generally used interchangeably but sometimes practices vary depending on the agencies and organizations involved. However, both typically prioritize family-centered planning and collaborative approaches.

In 2004, a diverse team of researchers aimed to enhance the cultural responsiveness of Family Group Conferencing by engaging with African American, American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN), and Latino communities in North Carolina (Waites et al., 2004). For African American families, researchers' findings included:

- Participants felt strongly that Family Group Conferencing should embrace family traditions, faith, song, and prayer.
- Since the African American community has practiced familial and collective problem solving long before the term "Family Group Conferencing" was coined, practitioners should honor families' expertise to draw on this wealth of knowledge to further strengthen family supports.
- It is vital to include extended family and relatives, as well as respected older family members who can help settle disagreements, in Family Group Conferencing.
- The location and venue of Family Group Conferencing meetings are important. Participants preferred meetings to be held at churches or community centers rather than family homes, which could feel like an intrusion on privacy.

The Minority Youth and Families Initiative

The Minority Youth and Families Initiative program aims to reduce the number of Black children entering the child welfare system in Polk County, Iowa. Child welfare staff work with families, actively listen to their concerns, support their needs, and involve them in decisions. Meetings are led by Black staff to ensure that families receive guidance that aligns with and honors Black culture. An evaluation of the Minority Youth and Families Initiative found that Parent Partners who have gone through child welfare themselves were able to reflect on this experience and were in a better position to offer advice and support to families (see more on Parent Support models in the section below). The program also provides staff training, connects families with community resources, and has flexible funds to help with immediate needs. Black participants reported that having a worker of the same race helped. Trust was an issue for many family members, with some saying they didn't fully trust anyone, no matter their race. Still, having a worker who shared their race made families feel more comfortable, supported, and connected, and helped them become more involved in the program. There are no published research studies on the effectiveness of this program, but it has received a "high" child welfare relevance rating from the California Evidence-Based Clearinghouse for Child Welfare (CEBC).

Parent Supports and Cultural Brokers

Cultural brokers and other forms of peer parent supports are examples of important strategies that are particularly effective for African American families (Siegel et al., 2011). Cultural brokers are individuals with professional or lived expertise who have a deep understanding of culture, social and economic systems, political context, and the ways in which these elements interact. The act of "cultural brokering" entails connecting or "mediating" among groups of people who belong to different cultural backgrounds to minimize discord or achieve a shared outcome (Jezewski, 1990).

A diverse team of practitioners and researchers developed and empirically tested a training curriculum for social workers, *Use of Cultural Brokers as an Approach to Community Engagement with African American Families in Child Welfare* (Siegel et al., 2011). This curriculum is designed to reduce the overrepresentation of African American families in the child welfare system through a community-based participatory research approach. Specifically, it engages African American community leaders and university faculty to emphasize the role of cultural brokers in shaping the experiences that African American families have within the system, and the services and supports they receive.

Training Topics for Cultural Brokers as an Approach to Community Engagement with African American Families in Child Welfare:

- History of racism and oppression within child welfare system
- Racial disproportionality in child welfare and changes for equity
- Community partnerships and collaboration with African American families
- Cultural brokerage approach to community engagement
- Considerations for improved child welfare partnerships with African American communities

The Cultural Broker Family Advocate Program (rated "highly relevant" by CEBC)[8] addresses racial disproportionality and disparities in child welfare by providing culturally sensitive brokering, advocacy, and support to families involved or at risk of being involved with the system. This program centers partnerships with child welfare agencies to ensure culturally appropriate services, reduce misunderstandings, and empower families to build on their strengths. It promotes family engagement and improves outcomes through community–agency collaboration. The Cultural Broker Family Advocate Program was first implemented in Fresno County, California, which illustrated a community-centered response to the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system. This program employed Black community members to work in partnership with child welfare workers and also to serve as family advocates, connecting families with early intervention services to prevent unnecessary child removal (Siegel et al., 2011).

[8] A "highly relevant" rating from the CEBC indicates that a program meets the needs of children, youth, and families who receive child welfare services (see CEBC Child Welfare System Relevance Levels).

While a randomized control trial has not been conducted on this program, limiting conclusions associated with causality, the proportion of African American children involved in child welfare declined over the decade following the program being implemented in Fresno (Crawford et al., 2022).

Kinship Caregiving Models

Although formal kinship care models have emerged more recently, informal kinship care has long been a culturally grounded and prevalent practice within African American communities. Structural racism has disproportionately affected African American families through high concentrations of poverty, over-policing, and mass incarceration, resulting in higher rates of system involvement (Braveman et al., 2022; Scott-Jones & Kamara, 2020). In response, informal kin networks—including extended relatives and fictive kin—have historically assumed caregiving roles, providing stability, continuity of care, and cultural connection for children separated from their parents (Denby et al., 2017; Dilworth-Anderson, 2019).

Kinship care models can mitigate the trauma associated with family separation and child welfare system involvement, preserve cultural identities and traditions, increase stability, promote sibling preservation, and support cognitive, academic, and behavioral development in children (Child Welfare Information Gateway, 2022). One study of Black children in kinship care found that informal kinship care models foster positive caregiver-child relationships and strengthen family functioning, both of which are vital to children's overall development (Washington et al., 2013). Kinship programs that support predominantly Black youth have also been associated with increased rates of permanent legal custodianship, higher rates of family-centered permanency, and a decrease in disparate outcomes between Black and White youth (Lee et al., 2021).

However, kinship caregivers often do not receive the same financial support as foster caregivers, which can create caregiver stress and impede their ability to adequately care for children (Clottey et al., 2015). Kinship caregivers face distinct challenges, including a higher likelihood of being older adults, unemployed, inadequately housed, and in poor mental health (Washington & Despard, 2024). These difficulties are exacerbated by financial insecurity and stress associated with caregiving responsibilities (Wu et al., 2020). Several studies document that although Black kinship caregivers face higher rates of poverty, they are less likely to receive public assistance (child care, housing support, TANF) and foster care payments compared to non-kin foster families (Washington & Despard, 2024; Wu et al., 2024). This disparity contributes to economic stress on Black kinship families who provide care within the child welfare system.

Navigation

Navigation services help youth and families understand and access targeted supports and programs that promote health, safety, and stability. Individuals who provide this support are referred to as "navigators." They typically guide, inform, and advocate on behalf of families who are experiencing obstacles when trying to access an array of services (namely, housing, legal, health, social, employment; Steinmetz & Fox, 2024).

Kinship navigation models, which center relative care, culture, and family unity, strengthen African American families (Steinmetz & Fox, 2024). Kinship navigator programs emphasize a "kin first" approach and fill a much-needed gap by supporting kin caregivers with information, referrals to services and supports, and other concrete supports (Casey Family Programs, 2023). These models have been shown to bolster permanency and stability among African American children with kin caregivers (McDaniel & Dyer, 2020). While there are approximately 70 kinship navigator programs nationwide, only seven programs[9] are currently rated by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (Lee et al., 2021).

Denby (2011) found that kinship liaisons helped caregivers improve coping skills and explore becoming permanent caregivers. However, findings show no changes on stress and safety scores. Caregivers initially reported having good housing and safety, likely because they feared losing guardianship. As trust was cultivated between the liaisons and family members, caregivers became comfortable sharing their true needs.

Relatedly, kinship liaisons, who are trained and licensed kinship navigators, promote relative care, which reduces the trauma associated with family separation and promotes family stability and cohesion (Denby, 2011). One study, whose sample included 43% African American kin caregivers and 53% African American children living with kin, found that kinship liaisons provided 27 types of support (mostly concrete and informational) that caregivers found valuable, but the most valuable was information and referrals on understanding the foster care process and becoming a permanent caregiver (Denby, 2011).

Sibling Preservation

Sibling preservation is an intentional approach in child welfare that focuses on keeping siblings together when they enter care outside their home, including kinship care, foster care, or adoptive placements. When it is not possible to place siblings together, sibling preservation includes practices that ensure they can maintain frequent and meaningful contact to support their relationships.

Sibling preservation is associated with greater stability, fewer emotional and behavioral problems, improved mental health and school performance, shorter time spent in foster care, and improved reunification outcomes among children (Casey Family Programs, 2020). Research on sibling preservation among Black families indicates a higher likelihood of placement instability among Black siblings when they are separated (Font & Kim, 2022). Child protection agencies can promote sibling placement and preservation through kinship prioritization, staff training, targeted recruitment, sibling visitation rights, and special supports for families fostering sibling groups (Casey Family Programs, 2020; Scannapieco & Jackson, 1996).

[9] The current list of Kinship Navigator Programs reviewed or rated by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse is available here.

Culturally Responsive Services

Culturally responsive services work best when the communities they serve help shape them. Programs designed with Black families, not just for them, are more likely to be trusted, used, and sustained.

Cultural responsiveness is a strengths-based practice of recognizing, respecting, and contingently responding to the cultural identities, lived experiences, and the historical context that shapes our individual and collective experiences (Giordano & Edwards, 2023). Services, programs, and approaches grounded in cultural responsiveness center the families' values, belief systems, traditions, heritage, language, and social networks while also addressing the structural inequities that shape their interactions with various systems (for example, education, health, financial; Chow & Austin, 2008; Giordano & Edwards, 2023; Hutchful, 2024). Therefore, cultural responsiveness should be reinforced by institutional policies, training, and ongoing supports to further strengthen children, families, and communities.

Connecting families with culturally responsive services that meet their needs and promote thriving requires a skilled child welfare worker attuned to the rich traditions, history, and cultural identities of families engaged in the child welfare system (Ortega et al., 2025). University of Minnesota's Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare offers numerous training opportunities and resources that center culturally affirming practices for professionals working in child welfare or family advocacy, including Culturally Affirming Practice to Support Prevention: Culture as Strength and Healing, which defines culturally affirming practices and provides examples of self-reflective prompts.

Despite strong research supporting programs that honor cultural and racial identity, numerous evidence-based practices that rely exclusively on empirical data often exclude the perspective of the community (Schindler, 2024; Zanti & Thomas, 2021). This narrow focus can result in programs that do not effectively meet the unique needs of diverse communities and hinders the development and implementation of culturally responsive services (Hutchful, 2024).

In 2019, Washington State's Department of Children, Youth, and Families (DCYF) found that African American and AI/AN children were removed from their homes at higher rates than other children. Even though DCYF offered services like substance use treatment and mental health support to address issues leading to removals, African American and AI/AN families were not engaging in many of these services due to the limited availability of culturally responsive services, programs that support fatherhood, services that offered prenatal support, and adolescent mentorship opportunities (Bordley et al., 2024). In response, DCYF started two pilot programs to make it easier for service providers to offer help to these families by easing rules about including only "evidence-based" programs. DCYF planned to invest nearly $3 million in these pilot programs to create new services to support over 400 African American and AI/AN families by 2025 (Bordley et al., 2024).

A Chapin Hall report from 2021 reviewed the research on 10 culturally specific programs (developed by and tailored for specific racial, ethnic, and other subgroups) and two culturally responsive programs (adapted to cultural norms of specific groups) that aim to impact one of four target outcomes: child safety, child permanency, child well-being, and family well-being (O'Brien et al., 2021). The report describes and rates each program on an evidentiary continuum based on research strength and readiness for review by the Title IV-E Prevention Services Clearinghouse (the Clearinghouse). It includes the following programs designed for African American children and families: **Chicago Parent Program, Strong African American Families Program** (now rated well-supported by the Clearinghouse), and **Effective Black Parenting Program** (now rated promising by the Clearinghouse).[10] Below we describe culturally responsive programs that center Black culture and tradition:

- **ParentPowered** is a text-based family engagement program designed for Black caregivers. It provides culturally relevant, strengths-based parenting support through easy, accessible text messages. ParentPowered supports Black caregivers by promoting children's development, strengthening parent-child relationships, and boosting parenting confidence. It uses culturally relevant content that reflects the diversity and culture of African American families and addresses systemic challenges. The program's text messages reinforce everyday learning, improve children's literacy and socio-emotional skills, and encourage caregiver self-care (Kirtman et al., 2023).
- **Effective Black Parenting Program** (EBPP) is a parenting skill-building program created for Black parents. EBPP uses culturally adapted cognitive-behavioral methods to teach parenting skills, promote cultural pride, reduce parental stress, improve child behavior and school performance, and help parents cope with racism. A core component of this program is addressing the drivers of parental stress and fortifying parents' coping mechanisms to bolster parenting mental health and sustain positive parent-child relationships. An evaluation of the impact of the EBPP among Black families with elementary school-aged children found that parents who participated in EBPP reported more nurturing behavior toward their children, better family relationships, and improved child behavior compared to parents who did not participate. One year after participation, the positive changes were sustained and parent-child relationships remained strong (Myers et al., 1992).
- **Promoting Strong African American Families** (ProSAAF; a variation of this program is rated "well-supported" by the Clearinghouse) is a family-focused program designed to strengthen relationships between parents and their children in two-parent African American families living in the rural South. It aims to support family well-being through preventive activities that engage and help families grow stronger together. Central to this program is addressing substance use among caregivers, risk factors related to substance use among youth, and drivers of parental stress and poor mental health (for example, financial stress, strained relationships, racism). One evaluation found ProSAAF program participants reported stable and improved relationship communication, confidence, satisfaction, partner support, coparenting, and parenting over time (Barton et al., 2018).

[10] A rating of "well-supported" by the Clearinghouse, the highest rating, requires at least two high-quality studies in real-world settings, with at least one showing positive effects that lasted 12 months or more after the program ended. Programs rated "supported" have at least one rigorous study showing positive effects that lasted at least 6 months after the program ended. Programs rated "promising" show positive results in at least one well-designed research study, but not over time (Wilson et al., 2024).

- **Parents and Children Excel** (PACE) is a diversionary program for children of color (primarily Black and Latino) aged 5 to 12 who are reported to child protection for educational neglect. PACE offers early case management that supports the entire family, before families move deeper through the child welfare system. The program provides preventive and corrective wrap around support for the child and family to keep children out of the system. An evaluation of this program found that families participating in PACE had lower reentry rates into the child welfare system compared to those who did not participate: 42% vs. 58% within 1 year, and 60% vs. 67% within 3 years (Swaminathan, 2021).

Child Welfare Practice: Training, Disaggregated Data, and Tools

To implement effective strategies that support African American children and their families, it is important that case workers are trained in the root causes of racial disproportionality in the child welfare system, are able to evaluate data broken down by race and ethnicity, and have tools to identify disproportionalities and disparities. While bias, equity, justice, and diversity training that employs a deficit-based approach rather than a strengths-based mode often fails, and may even exacerbate biases, there are promising approaches supported by scientific rigor. The most effective training and tools use "empowerment-based strategies," including those that address and alter habits by empowering individuals to be their own change agents and those that address the root causes of biases both internally (personally) and externally (Cox, 2023).

Cultural Competency Training

Culturally competent interventions must demonstrate (1) effectiveness among specific target populations and (2) the extent to which the target population or community cocreates, shapes, and affirms the intervention as meaningful and beneficial in their lives (Wells et al., 2009). Culturally competent training for social workers and child welfare workers who engage with Black families is widely recognized as essential for improving service outcomes and addressing systemic disparities (Williams, 2018). The National Association of Social Workers lists the standards and indicators for culturally competent social work in practice (see Figure 6).

Figure 6. Cultural Competency Standards for Social Workers and Child Welfare Workers

Other examples of evidence-based trainings to advance cultural competency among professionals who engage with the child welfare system include:

- Cultural Competence in Child Welfare (CCC) Curriculum Training: This intensive training focuses on adapting practice to cultural competence for African American, Asian/Pacific Islander, Hispanic/Latino, and AI/AN families.
- National Child Welfare Workforce Institute (NCWWI) Cultural Responsiveness Training: This program cultivates skills for public and tribal child welfare workers through culturally responsive family engagement strategies that emphasize anti-racism and cultural awareness.
- Cultural Humility and Structural Competence: This training was developed for family and youth peer advocates. It involves self-reflexivity, bias recognition, and person-centered practices, and includes booster sessions to reinforce skills over time (Lekas et al., 2020; Tervalon & Murray-García, 1998).

Disaggregated Data

In 2014, the *Race for Results* reported disaggregated data by race and ethnicity (and other characteristics) to examine how outcomes related to child success vary by race and ethnicity (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2014). The report introduced an index including a composite measure that showed comparisons by race and state across 12 key child developmental milestones. The findings indicated that African American, AI/AN, and Latino children encounter significant barriers to opportunity. To address racial inequities, the report offered four policy recommendations:

(1) collect and analyze racial and ethnic data to inform policy and decision making;

(2) use data and assessment tools to target investments for children of color;

(3) develop and implement evidence-based programs to improve outcomes for children and youth of color; and

(4) integrate economic inclusion strategies that include economic and workforce development efforts.

One promising tool to support data disaggregation in service of addressing systemic racial inequities is the Racial Equity Scorecard (Derezotes et al., 2008). This scorecard assesses racial disproportionality in the child welfare system at critical decision points, including the following data points for children engaged in the child welfare system:

- race/ethnicity,
- population estimates by age (ages 0–17),
- number of children in first placement in out-of-home care (nonduplicated),
- likelihood of placement, and
- disparity rate (or disparity index) in comparison to White representation.

The disparity index for Black children compared to White children is calculated by comparing the rates per 1,000 children in the population between groups. The Scorecard also presents the following unduplicated data at critical points as children move through the child welfare system:

- race/ethnicity,
- investigations (n, %, disparity rate),
- risk or safety determinations, confirmed reports, founded and registered reports,
- entered out-of-home care, and
- children living in initial out-of-home care placements

Predictive Risk Models

An emerging approach that both researchers and child welfare agencies are employing is predictive risk models to inform child welfare decision-making (Chadwick Center & Chapin Hall, 2018). Predictive analytics is an advanced risk modeling approach that leverages historical data to estimate the probability of specific behaviors or outcomes using machine learning (Lanier et al., 2020). Predictive risk models aim to assist case workers in synthesizing data from multiple sources by objectively guiding their decisions using data. Predictive risk model tools may be useful for eliminating racial bias in decision making, as the tools operate independent of caseworker judgements. A recent randomized controlled trial within the context of a "large-scale field experiment" with more than 100 trained social workers found that use of a "human-algorithm" tool in real-time decision making was associated with reductions in child health disparities and CPS surveillance of Black families (Grimon & Mills, 2025). However, caution must be taken when using this approach. Concerns have been raised that, due to the existing overrepresentation of African American, AI/AN, and Latino children across the child welfare continuum, predictive risk models might inadvertently exacerbate racial and ethnic biases and potentially worsen disparities (Gibbs et al., 2025; Glaberson, 2019; Gordon, 2019).

Evidence from some jurisdictions using predictive risk models suggests the potential of these tools to be implemented without increasing surveillance of Black families:

- Family Screening Tool (AFST), a rigorously evaluated tool used by the Allegheny County Department of Human Services (Pennsylvania), supports child welfare hotline staff by providing a risk score to help prioritize referrals and predict the likelihood of future involvement with CPS (Vaithianathan et al., 2019). Notably, the AFST addressed ethical concerns associated with this tool through community engagement and stakeholder feedback during the development stage. Staff were trained in how to use this tool and retained discretion to make decisions that differed from the "machine's" output. Research indicates this tool is "well calibrated," meaning higher scores correspond with an increased risk of subsequent serious harm, while also decreasing disparities in the decision-making process (Goldhaber-Fiebert & Prince, 2019; Inman & Adams, 2026).
- The Los Angeles County Risk Stratification Model was launched in 2021 and uses predictive risk models to provide child welfare supervisors with early and consistent case history data points that support engagement, services, and the management of investigations for diverse risk types. In areas where this tool was piloted, emerging analyses indicate improvements in measures of child safety and no reported increases in disparities or foster care placement (Inman & Adams, 2026; Putnam-Hornstein et al., 2022).

LIMITATIONS

This report does not represent a comprehensive account of all strategies and best practices to strengthen Black families or prevent child welfare involvement. The literature review conducted for this report was of limited scope and the review process was not systematic, hence the examples and descriptions presented here are illustrative rather than exhaustive. This review does not include a critical analysis of methodological rigor, underlying assumptions, program fidelity, or intervention quality for the services and programs discussed.

Although we made concerted efforts to elevate culturally diverse and affirming practices for African American children and families, we recognize that these approaches may not resonate with all racial and ethnic groups, including individuals who identify as Afro-Caribbean, Afro-Latine, or other communities of African descent. In addition, given the limited scope of this review, search terms related to mental health, substance use, and intimate partner violence were not included. This review also does not address promising practices for vulnerable children, including children with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ youth, and children with chronic illness or complex behavioral or mental health needs.

CONCLUSION & RECOMMENDATIONS

Effective strategies to support Black children and their families already exist. The work now is to implement them equitably and in genuine partnership with the communities they are meant to serve.

This literature review presents a comprehensive array of promising strategies and culturally affirming child welfare practices that can reduce racial disparities, support African American families, and prevent unnecessary family separation. The findings indicate that there are four core domains supported by evidence and practice that will likely have the most impact on strengthening Black families: (1) economic and concrete supports, (2) family engagement and preservation strategies, (3) culturally responsive services, and (4) child welfare practices.

Key findings from our literature review include:

- Evidence shows the positive impact of economic and concrete supports in preventing child welfare involvement for Black families.
- Collaborative partnerships that actively involve families in decision making and use a strength-based approach are associated with enhanced safety, permanency, and stability for Black children.
- Family engagement strategies that employ family team meetings and conferencing are successful especially when they embrace faith and song; include extended relatives and older family members; and take place at a church or community venue.
- Kinship care models can reduce the trauma associated with family separation and child welfare system involvement for African American children; protect cultural identities and traditions, increase stability, promote sibling preservation, and bolster academic achievement in children.
- Culturally responsive strategies that prioritize input from the target community in shaping the intervention will ensure the resulting approach is beneficial and respectful to cultural identity and heritage.
- It is important that child welfare case workers understand the underlying causes of why different racial and ethnic groups are disproportionately represented in the child welfare system, can evaluate disaggregated data, and have tools to prevent African American children from being disproportionately identified.

We offer the following **recommendations and considerations** for efforts to support Black children and their families and prevent child welfare involvement:

Figure 6. Six Recommendations for Equitable Child Welfare Practice

Address structural and economic drivers of disparity

Prioritize relational repair and trust building with African American families

Invest in culturally responsive and community-based supports

Codesign child welfare training, practice, and decision-making with impacted communities

Strengthen family preservation and kinship approaches

Design continuous quality improvement and governance approaches that prioritize equity and accountability

Address structural and economic drivers of disparity

Tactics to address structural and economic drivers of disparity include:

- Invest in income supports, flexible funds, housing resources, and child care as essential prevention strategies
- Streamline access and remove barriers to public benefits
- Adopt racial equity policy reviews and impact assessments to identify and eliminate structurally embedded drivers of disproportionality for Black families

Prioritize relational repair and trust building with African American families

Steps to repair relations and build trust include:

- Invest in community-centered engagement and relational trust-building practices that rebuild trust and shift away from surveillance-based interactions
- Partner with community leaders and trusted organizations to inform engagement strategies

Invest in culturally responsive and community-based supports

Black children and their families can be support through:

- Investing in culturally specific services, designed with and for African American families
- Supporting cultural brokers, peer supports, and community navigators
- Funding programs that communities know are effective and investing in capacity to build their evidence base

Codesign child welfare training, practice, and decision-making with impacted communities

Working with communities, child welfare leaders should:

- Codesign screening and decision-making processes
- Implement equity-centered supervision and coaching practices that embed bias interruption, reflective practice, and continuous learning into daily work

Strengthen family preservation and kinship approaches

Child welfare leaders should work to preserve families:

- Support family preservation practices and design placement approaches that look to kin first
- Expand kinship navigation services and economic supports for kin caregivers
- Promote sibling preservation and embed efforts to maintain community and cultural ties

Design continuous quality improvement and governance approaches that prioritize equity and accountability

Child welfare leaders should take into account equity and accountability when approaching governance:

- Leverage disaggregated data on race and ethnicity and continuous quality improvement (CQI) cycles embedded with equity-related metrics to monitor disparities
- Integrate racial impact assessments into policy and funding decision making
- Codesign infrastructure and policies that allow for lived experts to meaningfully contribute to system design and governance

This literature review highlights an array of strategies and practices designed to bolster and support African American families and prevent unnecessary family separation. However, further work is needed to examine, refine, and expand these strategies in partnership with the communities and families they are intended to support.

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About Chapin Hall
Chapin Hall is an independent policy research center that provides public and private decision-makers with rigorous research and achievable solutions to support them in improving the lives of children, families, and communities. Established in 1985, Chapin Hall's areas of research include child welfare systems, community capacity to support children and families, and youth homelessness. For more information about Chapin Hall, visit www.chapinhall.org or @Chapin_Hall.

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