



Elevating Indigenous Voices in the 21st Century Child Welfare Research Agenda

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INTRODUCTION

The 21st Century Child Welfare Research Agenda is a report that highlights critical areas of focus for advancing child welfare practices and programs. The report identifies over 300 research gaps in the child welfare system, which span across four categories: community-based prevention (CBP), transforming child protective services (CPS), improving outcomes in out-of-home care (OOHC), and strengthening the workforce (W).

To truly transform child welfare practices and programs, it is essential that the perspectives and lived experiences of marginalized communities are prioritized, specifically the perspectives and needs of Indigenous peoples and Native-led organizations. We propose that the research priorities outlined in the 21st Century Child Welfare Research Agenda should be expanded to amplify Indigenous voices and address critical issues facing Native communities.

Through interviews with eight individuals - including those with direct experience in the child welfare system, Indigenous community advocates, and legal professionals familiar with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) - this report identifies priority areas that should be centered to advance more equitable, culturally responsive, and community-driven child welfare practices.

UPLIFTING INDIGENOUS PRIORITIES IN CHILD WELFARE

Based on the interviews we conducted, several key areas emerged that should be prioritized. Furthermore, each of the key priorities have been aligned with the research agenda's four classifications:

- Inadequate Resources and Funding Disparities (CBP)
- Lack of Culturally- Responsive Practices and Undermining Tribal Sovereignty and Self-Determination in Child Welfare Matters (CPS, CBP, OOHC)
- Lack of Native Representation in Child Welfare Practices, Agencies, and Programs (W)
- Noncompliance with the Indian Child Welfare Act (ICWA) (OOHC, CBP)
- Systemic Inequities in Child Welfare and Historical and Intergenerational Trauma (OOHC, CBP, and W)

LIVED EXPERIENCES OF INDIGENOUS ADOPTÉES

Including quotes from Indigenous adoptees with lived experiences is vital to this research. Their stories amplify their voices and highlight systemic inequities, potentially shaping policy changes. Adoptees and their families also offer valuable insights into how cultural disconnection or reconnection has shaped their lives.

"My uncle told me. 'I remember the day they came and got you. We were all sitting outside. A car drove into the driveway. A white social worker got out scooped you up and put you in the car and drove off.' If my uncles had tried to stop her I'm sure they would have been arrested and I'd still be taken. I can't imagine how they felt. Helpless to protect their baby niece."

ADDRESSING RESEARCH GAPS FOR INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

The [21st Century Child Welfare Research Agenda](#) highlights critical areas of focus for advancing child welfare practices and programs. Expanding this agenda requires prioritizing areas that amplify Native voices, honor tribal sovereignty, and address systemic inequities. Below, we outline key areas for advancement, with additional insights and direct quotes from participants to be featured in an upcoming blog on the [Native Americans in Philanthropy website](#).

INADEQUATE RESOURCES AND FUNDING DISPARITIES

Inadequate resources and funding disparities destabilize Indigenous communities, impacting child welfare outcomes and the long-term effects of insufficient prevention. Key recommendations include promoting flexible funding to help tribal child welfare agencies address unique needs, linking housing support with child welfare efforts, and amplifying Indigenous voices through partnerships with Native-led organizations to advocate for systemic change.

LACK OF NATIVE REPRESENTATION IN CHILD WELFARE PRACTICES, AGENCIES, AND PROGRAMS

Participants highlighted a lack of Native representation in child welfare practices, agencies, and programs, including reform efforts and court proceedings. Native foster parents, crucial in reducing disproportionate out-of-home placements, face systemic barriers such as limited funding, affordable housing, and support services, compounded by historical trauma. Fostering Native children within their communities strengthens tribal sovereignty. Recommendations include increasing Native representation on councils and committees, expanding community-based education on ICWA, tribal sovereignty, and historical trauma, and offering professional development to build a more equitable and effective child welfare system.

SYSTEMIC INEQUITIES IN CHILD WELFARE AND HISTORICAL AND INTERGENERATIONAL TRAUMA

Systemic inequities in child welfare are deeply tied to the historical trauma of Indian boarding schools, which inflicted cultural genocide, family separation, and abuse. This legacy fosters ongoing distrust in a child welfare system often seen as echoing boarding school practices. Recommendations include investing in research on Indigenous families' unique needs and strengths, led by Indigenous communities and organizations to center their voices. Additionally, acknowledge historical trauma and take responsibility for boarding schools and related policies, as urged by the [National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition](#). These steps are essential for a more just and equitable child welfare system.

LACK OF CULTURALLY-RESPONSIVE PRACTICES AND UNDERMINING TRIBAL SOVEREIGNTY AND SELF-DETERMINATION IN CHILD WELFARE MATTERS

The lack of culturally responsive practices and undermining Tribal sovereignty and self-determination in child welfare matters are significant gaps in current child welfare systems. Research should focus on creating culturally informed interventions that respect Indigenous practices and worldviews, which are vital for better outcomes for Native children and families. Recommendations include involving tribes in all decision-making stages to uphold sovereignty, enhancing data sovereignty through tribal-managed agreements, and supporting tribes in developing systems to measure Native children's well-being in alignment with Indigenous values.

NONCOMPLIANCE WITH THE [INDIAN CHILD WELFARE ACT \(ICWA\)](#)

Interviewees raised concerns about noncompliance with ICWA, emphasizing its importance for protecting tribal sovereignty and preventing disproportionate removals of Native children. Systemic and historical biases, along with a lack of understanding of ICWA's provisions, contribute to these challenges. Recommendations include expanding ICWA training for child welfare professionals, judges, and attorneys to ensure proper implementation, and providing resources to Tribal governments and Native-led organizations to strengthen child welfare programs, actively participate in ICWA cases, and manage cases involving Native children independently.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to all the participants interviewed for this research project. Your time, expertise, and stories are deeply appreciated. This research was funded by the Annie E. Casey Foundation. While we are grateful for their support, we want to note that the findings and conclusions presented in this report are those of the authors alone, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the Foundation.