

# TARGET CONDITIONS, NOT FAMILIES

**Parents call on NYC's next mayor and City Council to reverse our city's over-investment in family policing and under-investment in communities**



New York City's next mayor and incoming City Council will inherit a vastly inequitable and harmful family policing system. State intervention in Black and brown families in NYC has grown under the De Blasio administration - as have calls for justice.

Candidates are being called upon to share their plans to address policing, incarceration and racial justice. Yet a parallel racist and harmful system is family policing by the city's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) and by the state hotline that drives over-surveillance of families.

This brief outlines parents' demands to ensure that Black families matter under NYC policy and law. It is possible to operationalize a new paradigm of family support that moves away from mandated reporting and state intervention as the front line for child safety and toward intentionally creating public policy, community institutions and peer networks to connect and lift families.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- *Reorganize New York City's structures of family support*
- *Eliminate ACS gatekeeping of resources and policies in other systems that channel families into ACS involvement*
- *Build networks of care within communities and institutions that affect family life*
- *Invest in peer first responders to support families, instead of hotline calls*
- *Invest in adapting community-led healing, restorative, and transformative justice approaches for family support*
- *Hold ACS accountable for acknowledging its harmful past*

**“The biggest barrier is being a poor Black woman with a child. There aren't many protections against racism.” - Imani**

# TARGET CONDITIONS, NOT FAMILIES

## End Invasive Surveillance of Families

The number of children in the foster system has dropped dramatically in the past 20 years but ACS' threatening surveillance of poor communities of color has grown.

- Investigations increased from 54,039 in 2013 to 59,166 in 2018, largely targeting poor communities of color. In Hunts Point in 2017, 10% of families were investigated. Between 2010-2014, nearly 1 in 3 families in Brownsville were subjected to an investigation, according to ACS.

The city also has aggressively increased use of invasive “court-ordered supervision” to monitor families.

- 5,000 families per year were typically under court monitoring until recently but that number has doubled. In 2017, more than 10,000 families had to report to a judge about family challenges, under constant threat of removal.

Parents often hide struggles with hunger, housing and even health and safety rather than reach out for help because of fear that ACS will get involved.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

**Reorganize New York City's structures of family support.** Families want resources that are not overseen by ACS. Investing in community-based organizations and grassroots groups that have long served and build trust with their communities can better align city spending with family and community needs.

We call on the next mayor to develop a workgroup or commission to plan for reorganizing NYC government structures to provide family supports outside of ACS, with parents and youth impacted leading that planning.

*A note on language: We avoid the terms “child welfare” and “foster care” as they suggest a rosy picture at odds with family experiences.*

### Racial Inequity

**94.5%**

Non-White in the Foster System

**73.6%**

Non-White in NYC

Percentage of Children

### Surveillance Increase

**+9.4%**

Hotline Reports

**+53%**

Court Monitoring of Families

Averages 2014-16 vs. 2017-19



# TARGET CONDITIONS, NOT FAMILIES

## Address Conditions and Policies that Pipeline Families to ACS



In our communities, schools, parks, sports and arts programs for children, mental health supports for families, affordable and safe housing, and crisis services are often inaccessible or low quality. Yet rather than transform community conditions, our city’s resources go to targeting individual families.

Policymakers need to ask: How are we ensuring that parents can support their families economically? How are our schools and community institutions creating a positive environment for families? How are our public policies strengthening or weakening community connections?

When one Bronx community group studied school absences, parents named chronic diseases like asthma, long commutes from shelters and lack of appropriate cold weather clothing as barriers. The community needed stronger healthcare resources, better environmental protection, stronger eviction prevention mechanisms to keep kids out of shelters and stronger wage protections—not more educational neglect reports. What’s needed for families in communities with systemic inequity and harm is systemic transformation.

“ACS became involved when I left kids with my 14-year-old when I went out for an appointment. If I had a babysitter, ACS would have not been in my life.” - Keyna

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Eliminate ACS gatekeeping of key family needs, including priority childcare and housing.** ACS acts as a gatekeeper to meaningful resources and support that could have prevented family crisis. This gatekeeper role must be eliminated so that families can be prioritized for support without a precondition of system involvement.

**Complete an intersectional analysis of the ways systems serving BIPOC and low-income families put families at risk of separation.** Systems including housing, education, healthcare, substance abuse and maternal health not only channel families toward ACS but exacerbate the harm of system involvement. Policies and practices must be examined to reduce punitive impacts.

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## Strengthen Networks of Community Care



Parents raising children under the double burden of economic hardship and racism should not have to live with unprecedented scrutiny of our parenting. Surveillance hurts families and weakens communities. We are scared to talk to our doctors or our children’s teachers. These people are supposed to be our helpers, but because of over-reporting, we see them as people who can harm us. That makes children more vulnerable. Parents who are struggling hide what they’re going through, and struggles can become crises.

Families under stress need spaces that support our healing. We need safe places for our children. We need opportunities to develop strong relationships with other parents. We need peer support, and outlets from isolation and stress

However, schools where most families are stretched thin may not have the funds or volunteers to host fun family activities where parents can connect. If parks and libraries are not safe and welcoming, parents don’t have the opportunity to build relationships at story time or as their children run around. Small acts of community serve as a net for all families. Yet collective care networks thrive through a level of community stability that current public policy does not support.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Invest in peer first responders within communities currently impacted by ACS over-surveillance.** Parents want support from peers who have been through similar experiences, are trained to connect them to resources, and are not mandated reporters or affiliated with ACS. Peer support initiatives can reduce reliance on state intervention.

**Build systems of care within institutions that serve and affect families.** The Bronx Healing-Centered Schools movement offers a vision for how schools can address child and family stress, not increase it. Ending family shelter rules that limit babysitting and respite options will reduce families’ stress during tough times.

**“I was in a shelter with three kids and we didn’t have food. I didn’t tell anybody because I was scared to get an ACS case. We ate peanut butter for six days. I wasn’t aware of pantries. If there was peer support or somebody that wasn’t a mandated reporter, I would have asked for help.” - Paige**



# TARGET CONDITIONS, NOT FAMILIES

## Invest in Community-led Approaches to Preventing and Addressing Harm



Parents need safe people and places to turn to address harm and conflict within their families where they are not in danger of losing all authority over their family lives. Many times, parents are aware that they and their children are suffering but fear that opening up to a family counselor or seeking services will lead to foster system involvement.

Community accountability approaches developed in immigrant and LGBTQ communities where policing is understood as harmful can offer mechanisms to support parents in addressing serious issues including child sexual assault, domestic violence and community violence in voluntary settings. These models provide a deep level of relational support, holding space for people to navigate through crisis and toward healing. These approaches should be explored and expanded with care, not through ACS but within organizations that families and communities trust.

“I made it part of my daily routine to take pictures of my kids before taking them to daycare and school so that I would have proof that my children were fine before they left my home. For a parent like me, it just makes sense.” – Lou

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Invest in innovation to explore and adapt healing, restorative, and transformative justice practices already used in DV, youth justice and criminal justice movements to be supportive of parents and families.** Many white parents can be open with mental health providers and others in their communities about family challenges without fearing ACS involvement. Black and brown families are not privileged with that same trust and support. To decrease over-reliance on state intervention in communities of color, parents need supportive practices and responsive networks that are intentional about protecting family self-determination, so they can seek support if and when harm occurs.

# TARGET CONDITIONS, NOT FAMILIES

## Hold ACS Accountable for Its Past - and move NYC Toward a Different Future



With strong political leadership and partnership with NYC's activist community that centers impacted parents and youth, our city can invest in community support and family justice, not family policing.

That work needs to begin from a frame of understanding that our current landscape has been created by public policy, and therefore can be remade. Secondly, that understanding will need to include a deep reckoning with the ways that racism and other forms of oppression have fueled the policies that entrap families first in harsh conditions and then in state intervention. Our social system has been constructed to limit the power of BIPOC and low-income communities. That constructed oppression underpins our most impacted communities and system dynamics today.

ACS and contracted agencies must acknowledge the racist origins of the foster system and their specific institutions and apologize for harm to families and communities.

“My niece’s removal to foster care was a direct outcome of the ramifications of slavery and institutional racism. This may sound alarmist. However, my niece is only six generations removed from slavery, two generations removed from Jim Crow, and is a third generation experiencing the disruption of our family by child welfare.”

- Amber

### RECOMMENDATIONS

**Demand that ACS and contracted agencies reckon with their past and the harm of family policing, centering parents and youth impacted in that reckoning.** It is critical that ACS and agencies reckon with the harmful structures and attitudes that were foundational to the foster system in New York City and that persist today, and that elected officials work in partnership with families impacted to develop concrete recommendations for further eliminating harm in family support.



# TARGET CONDITIONS, NOT FAMILIES



We call on candidates for mayor and City Council to address family policing in their platforms and go on record committing to parents' recommendations for a new approach in NYC.

These demands were developed through Community Conversations with dozens of parents impacted by ACS and by the staff of Rise, a NYC parent-led advocacy organization that has worked with hundreds of parents impacted by ACS over the past 16 years.

## Allies

Organizations allied with this vision include Brooklyn Defenders, Bronx Defenders, Center for Family Representation, Neighborhood Defender Services and NYU Family Defense Clinic, which represent parents impacted by ACS intervention and family separation.

The Bronx  
Defenders



## About Rise

Rise builds parent leadership to dismantle the family policing system and create communities that invest in families and offer collective care, healing and support.

Learn more and get involved: [risemagazine.org](http://risemagazine.org) / @readrisemag