



VOICES OF EXPERIENCE

FINDINGS FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH WOMEN
IMPACTED BY THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

SUMMARY



HOPE. HEAL. THRIVE.

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“There has to be a place where you can ask for help without it being used against you.” - Mother

PURPOSE AND APPROACH

Voices of Experience centers the perspectives of women directly impacted by Child Welfare in Monroe County, New York. HOPE585 conducted four trauma-informed focus groups between March and April 2026 with 21 women representing varied racial backgrounds, communities, family structures, and experiences including preventive services, child removal, reunification, and ongoing system involvement.

WHAT WOMEN DESCRIBED

Across all four groups, participants described a system they experienced as punitive, unpredictable, and difficult to navigate. Fear, powerlessness, emotional exhaustion, and distrust were recurring themes. Women reported that unmet basic needs and family stressors were sometimes interpreted as evidence of neglect or parental failure rather than opportunities for support. Several described seeking help for housing, childcare, children’s behavioral health, or other needs only to experience a CPS report or investigation.

The result, participants said, was a chilling effect on help-seeking. Women described withholding information from schools, healthcare providers, therapists, and community agencies because they feared that acknowledging a struggle could trigger surveillance or family separation. Participants also reported receiving little information about their rights, unclear explanations of Child Welfare processes, inconsistent expectations, and inadequate access to peer advocacy or specialized legal support.



Voices of Experience

MAJOR THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUPS WITH WOMEN IMPACTED BY THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

 BASIC NEEDS MISINTERPRETED Unmet basic needs such as housing, childcare, and financial stability are often interpreted as neglect or parental failure rather than opportunities for support. “There has to be a place where you can ask for help without it being used against you.”	 HELP-SEEKING LEADS TO INVESTIGATION Many women described reaching out for help only to have it escalate into a CPS report or investigation, which creates fear and keeps families from seeking support in times of need. “If you reach out, someone’s going to judge you and report you.”	 LACK OF SUPPORT IN SCHOOLS & SYSTEMS When teachers and other mandated reporters do not provide appropriate support for autism, mental health conditions, or behavioral challenges, situations can escalate to Child Welfare cases. “I’m scared to bring them to doctors, school, anywhere.”	 A PUNITIVE & BUREAUCRATIC SYSTEM Women experienced a system that prioritizes bureaucratic requirements over strengthening families and maintaining parent-child bonds. “I was in fight or flight mode all the time.”	 ASSUMPTIONS AND MISTRUST Participants described assumptions of parental guilt and distortions of their words in interactions with Child Welfare officials, leaving them feeling disbelieved and judged. “I guess if there had been a safe place to get help in the first place, that would’ve been a completely different situation.”	 LACK OF INFORMATION AND ADVOCACY Parents were not provided with information about their rights or Child Welfare processes, and described fear of retaliation if they advocated for themselves and their families. “I didn’t know my rights, and I was afraid to speak up.”	 LASTING TRAUMA Child Welfare involvement leaves enduring emotional and psychological effects, including fear, isolation, and a loss of trust in systems meant to support families. “It’s not just what happened in the moment — it stays with you long after.”
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MONROE COUNTY CONTEXT

The report places these experiences within a local system facing significant pressure. It cites research and prior analyses showing that Monroe County has a 37% higher investigation rate than New York City; 76% of local investigations close without a finding of child maltreatment; and approximately 915 unfounded investigations are actively managed on any given day. A previous HOPE585 analysis estimated approximately \$11.54 million in annual direct governmental expenditures on unfounded investigations, or about \$2,243 per investigation.

The report also highlights racial and economic disparities. State data from 2021–2023 show Black children were 5.5 times more likely and Hispanic children 3.5 times more likely to enter foster care than White children. In Monroe County, 96.6% of reports to the State Central Register include allegations of neglect or deprivation of necessities. Participants consistently identified unmet needs such as housing, childcare, emotional support, school support, behavioral health services, and day-to-day stabilization assistance.

WHAT PARTICIPANTS RECOMMENDED



Shift toward community-based prevention and family support.

Families need voluntary, relational, community-rooted help before challenges escalate. Participants identified housing, childcare, mentorship, transportation, behavioral health, financial stabilization, parent advocacy, and emotional support as critical resources. They emphasized that prevention should be clearly separated from punitive system involvement.



Incorporate lived-experience leadership.

Parents and caregivers who have navigated Child Welfare should have meaningful roles in system reform, professional training, peer mentorship, and family engagement. Participants believed lived experience can strengthen trust, cultural understanding, and practical problem-solving.



Increase transparency and accountability.

Families should receive clear explanations of their rights, expectations, processes, and available resources at every stage. Participants also called for stronger accountability when professional conduct is unethical, discriminatory, misleading, or violates family rights.



Invest in trauma-informed and culturally responsive practice.

Training should translate into worker behavior, communication, and decision-making. Participants urged systems to weigh the potential trauma of removal alongside safety concerns and to protect parent-child attachment whenever children enter foster care.



BOTTOM LINE

The women in these focus groups did not argue that child safety concerns should be ignored. Their experiences point instead to the need for a more precise, supportive, and transparent response to families in crisis. The report call for a stronger distinction between child maltreatment and hardship, earlier access to trusted community support, meaningful inclusion of lived experience, clearer rights and accountability, and greater attention to the trauma that system intervention and parent-child separation can cause.



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