

Family Policing:

Sourcing Considerations

Media coverage of the family policing system has historically relied heavily on institutional sources like agency officials, the police, and court-appointed guardians for children. This is likely due in part to the challenges involved with speaking to impacted families who may be: in crisis, advised by their lawyers against speaking with reporters, prohibited by a judge from speaking publicly, or mistrustful of the media in general. The resulting coverage often reinforces the very hierarchies and myths that justify family separation in the first place.

This guide includes concrete recommendations for working with a variety of sources. The first section offers tips for building trust with directly impacted families and suggests alternative sources if a particular family is unable or unwilling to speak with the press. The second section offers important context to consider when working with institutional sources, including temporary custodians (like foster placements and kinship guardians), family policing agency officials, attorneys, and police.

Directly Impacted *Sources*

People impacted by family policing investigations, separations, and the foster system—including parents and children—are critically important sources. Regularly consulting impacted families is the best way to ensure accurate and nuanced coverage of the family policing system.

There will likely be some hurdles involved in these conversations, particularly if you are hoping to interview a child, but many journalists have proven that it can be done and done well. Steve Volk encourages journalists to [“embrace the difficulties”](#) that may seem onerous but go a long way in producing reliable and compelling journalism.

Directly Impacted Families

Some families are willing to speak openly about their experience being investigated or separated. When interviewing impacted families, it is important to remember that parents are not a monolith, and neither are children. For example, children’s experiences vary across race, age, and placement type. Importantly, being impacted as a parent and being impacted as a child are not mutually exclusive; many people impacted by the system as children are also impacted by the system again when they become parents.

Media coverage of the family policing system often overlooks the ongoing steps parents take to care for their children and work toward reunification. Journalists can change this dynamic by approaching interviews with compassion, exploring the relationship between children and their parents, and noting their reunification efforts.

Many families, especially those with active cases, may decline to speak with the media due to credible fears of retaliation, humiliation, and prolonged family separation. Legal barriers can also prevent parents and children from speaking for themselves. Court imposed gag orders can restrict families from speaking publicly about their cases, while confidentiality laws can prevent them from accessing, much less sharing, the very records they need to verify their side of the story.

When a family whose story you are covering isn’t able to speak on the record, directly impacted people and advocates who are not navigating active cases can be important sources. They can provide context about how the system operates and how it has impacted their own lives and families.

Advocacy Organizations

A growing number of advocacy organizations are working to reduce the harms of the family policing system. These groups vary in their lens, approach, and tactics—ranging from litigation and legislative advocacy to community organizing and direct support for families. They can be important sources for understanding efforts to address systemic harm and for providing context that helps journalists avoid framing that reproduces that harm.

Visit Movement for Family Power’s [Movement Map](#) to find a national list of organizations, collectives, and coalitions fighting for families, including those led by directly impacted people.

Do’s and Don’t’s

- **Do** allow and invite people to include their advocate, attorney, or support person in an interview to allow additional protection and comfort.
- **Do** ask people how they would like to be identified. Consider using terms like expert, advocate, survivor, mother/father of (names of children), parent, or the individual’s first name. If anonymous sourcing or using pseudonyms is an option, offer it at the beginning of the interview.
- **Don’t** use stigmatizing or reductive terms like biological mother, biological father, perpetrator, or victim unless these terms are chosen by the family.
- **Do** write out and share questions in advance where possible.
- **Do** define any journalistic terms you use during the interview, like “off the record” or “on background.”
- **Do** honor requests to exclude names or details that might subject people to retaliation or prolonged family separation.
- **Don’t** use mugshots or other images that the person has not consented to have published.
- **Do** provide flexibility around scheduling, as family policing cases are unpredictable and time consuming.

Institutional *Sources*

Temporary Custodians (commonly referred to as “Foster Parents”)

Foster parents—whom we refer to as “temporary custodians”—operate within a government system that influences how they perceive children and their parents. Temporary custodians typically receive information filtered through foster agency staff and reports, meaning that their understanding of a case is shaped by the perspective of the family policing system. Many have little or no direct relationship with the child’s parents, and, even when contact exists, positive collaboration between custodians and parents is rarely supported by agencies.

While some see their role as providing short term care to children in support of family reunification, others become a temporary custodian with the goal of adopting a child. These differing motivations, along with financial incentives, can influence how they perceive families and the system overall.

Journalists should be mindful of the power and privilege dynamics between temporary custodians and parents. Within the family policing system, custodians are often presented by agencies and courts as credible and trustworthy, while parents—particularly Black, Indigenous, Latine, and low income parents and parents with disabilities—are portrayed as unreliable or unfit. These portrayals reflect broader social hierarchies based on race, class, and ability.

Media coverage also reinforces these hierarchies by framing temporary custodians as heroes or rescuers. Instead, reporting should examine how the system itself positions temporary custodians in these roles and consider the broader consequences of family separation for children, parents, and communities.

Kinship Guardians

Under the kinship guardianship care program, relatives or fictive kin (close family friends or community members) serve as certified temporary custodians. This is a legal arrangement that can only be authorized by the court. Like non-relative custodians, kinship guardians receive monthly payments in exchange for caring for the child and must comply with the same rules.

While kinship placement is often preferable to placement with strangers, it carries significant challenges that deserve careful attention. The program's [financial structure](#) can create incentives for kinship guardians to formalize custody arrangements at the expense of parents' relationships with their children. To access financial assistance, kinship guardians are often required to prohibit parents from living in their homes, monitor parents, report their behavior to agency officials, supervise visits, and limit contact between parents and children. These dynamics can pit loved ones against each other and disrupt families who might otherwise work together to care for a child.

Reporters can help the public understand kinship placements more clearly by asking caregivers, parents, and advocates about how these dynamics play out in real life rather than assuming kinship placements are inherently straightforward or conflict free. Journalists can also reference the dual realities that being cared for by relatives can be deeply protective for children and that the surrounding system can pressure those same relatives into surveillance roles that undermine trust and connection among families.

Family Policing Agency and Law Enforcement Officials

A 2019 [Berkeley Media Studies Group report](#) found that law enforcement officials were quoted in 36% of family policing articles, child welfare professionals in 21%, and agency representatives in 11%. Other experts were seldom quoted. These choices allow government agencies to disproportionately influence the way that people understand the issue.

Police, prosecutors, and other criminal legal system actors have a track record of providing inaccurate information to journalists, sometimes purposefully and sometimes inadvertently. See this [piece](#) from The Washington Post or [The Center for Just Journalism's Building a Better Beat report](#) for examples of inaccurate or misleading police claims, along with recommendations for better vetting of these claims.

Similarly, family policing agencies have a documented record of withholding information that could reflect poorly on the agency or contradict official narratives. For example, in 2025, Disability Rights Oregon documented that the Oregon Department of Human Services [covered up agency failures](#) that led to the death of a 17 year old child in the state's foster system. In 2023, Andy Newman at The New York Times reported that the New York City's Administration for Children's Services (ACS) [buried a racial equity audit](#) in which staff described the agency as a "predatory system that specifically targets Black and brown parents." That same year, Eli Hager of ProPublica exposed that while ACS publicly claimed to support parents' "Miranda warning" protections, it was [quietly lobbying](#) to weaken them.

Journalists should independently verify claims made by law enforcement and family policing agency officials wherever possible and provide appropriate caveats and context when it is not possible.

Legal *Sources*

Lawyers that represent children and parents impacted by the family policing system are typically not able to speak with journalists about their clients, though they may be willing to speak to the system's function more broadly. It is important to understand the role of attorneys and court-appointed advocates for children when covering the family policing system.

Attorneys for Parents

Unlike in the criminal legal system, parents involved in the family policing system have no *federal* constitutional or statutory right to an attorney in child abuse or neglect cases. However, in most states, parents do have the right to a lawyer once they appear in court, and they may also choose to hire their own. Some localities, like New York City, go further, giving parents the right to consult with an attorney before or during an investigation, even if the case has not gone to court.

In places like [New York City](#), there is a strong public defense system providing free legal representation through parent or family defender offices. But in many other areas, no comparable system exists. Parents may have to rely on overburdened court-appointed attorneys, pay for private counsel they cannot afford, or face the system entirely alone. Ultimately, access to quality legal representation depends not only on the state but also on where a family lives within it.

While attorneys for parents may not be able to speak to journalists about a specific case, they can be critical background sources to understand how the system functions in a particular jurisdiction.

Attorneys & Advocates for Children

While there is no *federal* right to attorneys for parents, certain federal funding is contingent upon states appointing a guardian ad litem or court-appointed special advocate (CASA) to represent the child's interests. The titles used for these advocates vary. Guardians Ad Litem (GAL), Volunteer Guardians Ad Litem (VGALs), Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASA), Attorneys for Children, and Attorneys Ad Litem (AALs) are some of the most common. The role of these advocates varies across and even within states.

In some jurisdictions, children are appointed an attorney who advocates for or at least shares the child's stated wishes in court. In others, the appointed attorney or advocate is tasked with determining and advocating for what *they* believe is in the child's best interest—even if that differs from what the child wants.

Guardians Ad Litem

Guardians ad litem are generally non-attorneys who are trained by a court program to advocate for children in court. They are tasked with representing a child's "best interests." However, that definition is vague and shaped by judicial preferences, meaning that they may prioritize positions that judges or the system prefer rather than the child's actual needs or the family's context.

Journalists should be aware of these distinctions, as well as scholars' warnings that volunteer GAL models—including "CASAs" (Court Appointed Special Advocates)—carry particularly [significant risks of racial and class bias](#). Importantly, CASA programs are largely made up of middle-class white women, raising concerns about how their perspectives may shape notions of the "best interests" of poor children of color and how readily courts defer to their views.

Attorneys for Children

Children's attorneys can be employees of state agencies, local legal aid programs, legal clinics at law schools, or private attorneys who are appointed by courts. They may act under a best-interest model, depending on state law. In most states, attorneys for children must maintain confidentiality and only disclose information needed to represent the child or to prevent a crime or protect someone from serious harm.

If seeking attorneys for children as a source, journalists should consider that many of the same bias considerations for GALs described above also apply to children's attorneys. Furthermore, judges who have discretion with respect to appointments often do not appoint attorneys who routinely take positions they strongly disagree with.

Children's attorneys can protect the legal rights of children but may lack training on child development and experience working with families in distress. Attorneys can be held accountable for unethical behavior through state bars or lawsuits for malpractice, but most states grant some level of immunity to attorneys for the results of their advocacy.

Family Court

Many proceedings and cases in family and dependency courts are closed to the public, which means reporters may not be able to simply walk in and observe. A small number of states have laws or rules that make courts presumptively open, though judges can still close individual courtrooms or hearings at their discretion. We encourage journalists to

familiarize themselves with the [court rules and public records requests processes](#) in their jurisdiction. Whenever possible, we encourage journalists to observe court proceedings to deepen familiarity. Take note of barriers to court access and consider incorporating this into your reporting.