

L A U R E N J . S I L V E R



# SYSTEM KIDS

**Adolescent Mothers** and the **Politics** of **Regulation**

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*Adolescent Mothers and the Politics  
of Regulation*

LAUREN J. SILVER

The University of North Carolina Press CHAPEL HILL

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Dedicated to those  
who have generously shared  
their stories

# Acknowledgments

*Your silence will not protect you.*—Audre Lorde

Many have supported me in the writing of this book. I have often feared whether I would “get it right,” because I wanted this book to do justice to the youth and providers who shared their experiences with me. Remaining silent, however, was never an option. I am first and foremost thankful to the young moms and service providers who welcomed me into their lives and their homes, shared their stories, and let me accompany them to court, schools, medical clinics, and numerous other sites across their large northeastern city. I learned more from them than they will ever know. Even though I cannot mention any of the participants by their actual names (just as I cannot name the city where they live), their voices are present and unique; they make up the heart and soul of this book. This book stems from their collective visions of hope and persistence against constraints. I am humbled by the openness and generosity of these young women and their families. It was truly an honor to spend time with them and to get to know them. After many years, I continue to be inspired by their courage, integrity, and willingness to share their stories.

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## They Want to See You Fail

### *Dilemmas in Child Welfare*

Soon after sundown, in the dimly lit front room of her inner-city apartment, eighteen-year-old Maleka told me about registering for nursing school and the challenges she faced with childcare. All the while, Maleka repeatedly swatted at her wall with a towel, keeping the scurrying roaches from making their way down to her two boys, playing on a secondhand couch. The swatting seemed so habitual that I wondered whether this was something she repeated every evening. It did not distract her from our conversation, nor did it bother her two boys, who continued to play.

This simple, disturbing act represents the many extraordinary, but seemingly minor, efforts of young mothers to protect their children. Maleka lived alone with her sons in an apartment leased by a Supervised Independent Living (SIL) program. The local child welfare agency, Children and Youth Services (CYS), funded this program through a government contract and expected SIL to facilitate residential, educational, and social services.<sup>1</sup> In spite of the dangerous environments and bureaucratic obstacles they encountered on entering the child welfare system, young mothers in SIL persevered. I came to know the SIL program and its young families first as a program manager with concrete responsibilities and then later as a researcher who continued to advocate for clients.

Once the child welfare system assumes legal custody of abused or neglected youth, the youth are *in care* and the government provides for their well-being. How do we understand the “care” provided, given the circumstances that Maleka and her children and many other young families face? How would an adolescent’s living alone with her children in dangerous and pest-infested conditions

satisfy any parent's wishes for his or her child's well-being, let alone meet the legal mandates of the state? How does the state normalize program conditions for these particular children and youth, who simultaneously occupy several categories of disadvantage?

The inspiration for this book came from young mothers' voices.<sup>2</sup> Youth in SIL shared with me stories of survival despite abuse, homelessness, rape, failed suicide attempts, imprisonment, dropping out of school, and abandonment. This book resists media and scholarly representations that decontextualize and stereotype marginalized young people as flat, culturally deficient characters who act in violent and deceitful ways that white, middle-class citizens cannot understand. These distorted representations follow a long tradition in the United States of making the racial Other into a spectacle for general consumption and positioning those with access to dominant culture as normative (Alonso et al. 2009; Farley 2002; Rios 2011).

Mothers expressed dynamic visions for their futures. The SIL program's mission rhetorically reflected the mothers' objectives: to "provide temporary housing and comprehensive services to low-income teen girls and their families to help them achieve economic independence and family well-being." In spite of these laudable goals, youth aspirations were largely unfulfilled, in part because of barriers within the child welfare system and its programs. Young families faced challenges within the system, and these exacerbated the obstacles of living in impoverished and racially segregated urban communities. This book reveals why and how the child welfare system compromises its own mission of promoting the well-being of young families.

Scholars offer powerful, historically documented narratives about changes in the nature of U.S. cities through demographic, economic, political, and social shifts that cause divestment, in particular in inner-city neighborhoods (Dreier, Mollenkopf, and Swanstrom 2004; Kantor and Brenzel 1992; Sugrue 1999). Families and children shoulder massive burdens as mass incarceration removes parents from the home and disconnects them from mainstream institutions (Alexander 2012; Beckett and Western 2001; Davis 2003; Haney 2004; Wacquant 2002). No clear border separates child welfare interventions and the urban environments in which these programs function; rather, this book shows how inequalities within bureaucratic

systems mirror and perpetuate racial, gendered, and class-based divisions in the city and society. We need to understand how families experience child welfare interventions in the context of continuing urban poverty, violence, and racial segregation. Only then can we foresee what are often labeled as the “unforeseen” implications of public policies concerning children and youth.

Once the state takes custody of a young mother, her care and that of her children become fragmented, distributed among different urban bureaucracies, including health, mental health, educational, and residential systems. In the process, these systems turn individuals into managed “cases,” causing youth to shift between identities—as mothers, delinquents, dependents, clients, patients, students, and workers. Scholars generally investigate these populations as separate entities, when in actuality youth tend to occupy simultaneous and shifting statuses.<sup>3</sup> As youth move across system settings, they deploy creative strategies that, when considered in isolation, cannot be recognized by policymakers, practitioners, and the public. Nor do we get a sense of the burdens experienced by youth who must negotiate multiple institutions and identities at once. Research on these populations tends to be quantitative in design (Smith 2011). I address substantive and methods gaps in the scholarship and use ethnography to learn *how* youth experience multiple system settings and *why* youth face challenges negotiating their identities.

Throughout the book, I refer to the young participants through changing characterizations, as *young mothers*, *adolescent moms*, *clients*, and *youth*. I do this deliberately to emphasize the fluidity of their multiple identities and to signify the distinct effects of different social labels. This book highlights the trajectories of youth across settings in order to emphasize the strategies of youth themselves. As they act as navigators of multiple systems, their narratives challenge popular conceptions of poor “disconnected youth,” suggesting instead that institutions structure fragmentation. The ethnographic form reconstitutes and recaptures the coherence of youth narratives. It is not that their daily lives are unintelligible but, rather, that fragmented systems project disjointed representations.

To understand youth trajectories, it is essential to contextualize the roles and decisions of caseworkers. Throughout the book,

I use the terms *caseworker* and *case manager* interchangeably. Officials across institutions did not usually trust youth; therefore, caseworkers were charged with acting on their behalf while negotiating health care, childcare, and other services for youth. Youth and their caseworkers struggled to manage the gap between formal stipulations and the informal realities of underresourced, stigmatized, and dangerous program contexts. For instance, although the SIL program and CYS system expected youth to participate in an educational program, these organizations did not provide many clients with childcare resources. Further, moms were either afraid or unable to leave their children with friends or family members in unsafe SIL apartment buildings. As we will see, youth and their caseworkers worked together to manage an impression of a client's educational compliance when the institutions responsible for the youth's care did not coordinate supports for actual compliance. By delving into the daily work experiences of caseworkers, this book offers a needed account of how they too were trapped within the system. Clients and officials across levels shared feelings of entrapment. However, daily experiences of these restrictions varied, because access to power shaped the stakes in vastly different ways. For instance, caseworkers often felt inadequate and could potentially lose their jobs. Adolescent mothers faced homelessness and losing custody of their children as the possible costs of perceived noncompliance. We know the future is bleak for many young families transitioning from the child welfare system; however, we do not yet understand how youth needs are compromised by the same child welfare structures intended to foster the adolescent moms' success.

The young mothers (ages sixteen to twenty) with whom I worked lived alone with their children in apartments leased by a SIL program.<sup>4</sup> Federal, state, and local legislation provided the impetus for SIL, and the program was designed to prepare youth for "self-sufficient" adulthood. Visions, a private nonprofit organization, ran this SIL program and supported fifty families in rented apartments at three buildings. Apartments were located in low-income, predominantly African American, urban communities in a large northeastern U.S. city. The SIL program in this book served a specific population of "aging out" youth: adolescent mothers and their young children. A judge ordered

all placements. Two different branches of the child welfare system—the dependency program and the juvenile justice program—referred clients to SIL. The family court judged a youth to be a “dependent” of the state after authenticating that a caregiver had abused or neglected her. Such a youth would come under the jurisdiction of the dependency program. The family court judged a youth as “delinquent” for committing mainly nonviolent offenses, such as running away from home, drug possession, or petty theft. Such a youth would come under the jurisdiction of the juvenile justice program. The SIL program administered services the same way to both delinquent and dependent clients. Youth intermingled at the three community apartment sites were subject to the same program rules and received the same program resources and services. However, the child welfare and court systems treated delinquent youth more harshly than dependent youth, and delinquent youth received inequitable access to some resources such as childcare.

Youth coped with regulation in creative ways as they capably managed their identities, constructed informal support networks, and created impressions of compliance when actual compliance was infeasible. Simultaneously, youth had to prove themselves worthy of public care and capable of parenting. No matter how culturally resilient, young families experienced institutional and attitudinal barriers to their well-being. Foregrounding youth trajectories led to both losses and gains. My research did not elucidate elaborate constructions of particular system settings, but I believe that the benefits of this approach outweighed this loss; we gain a much-needed coherent narrative about youth identities.

### Risky Critique

I realize that I take a risk in exposing these system challenges. In the United States, federal, state, and local governments are slashing social services, community programs, and public education for low-income youth of color (Tilton 2010). At the same time, more prisons are being built (Alexander 2012). Increased expenditure on U.S. penal systems is not indicative of a shift toward reduced government intervention in social life. Rather, the change indicates more exclusionary

and punitive approaches to the regulation of marginalized communities (Davis 2003; Fisher and Reese 2011; Haney 2010). The SIL program, policies, and service negotiations described in this book must be understood in a situated historical and cultural context. Years have passed since the occurrence of the everyday interactions represented here, and many of the specific policies of SIL in this city have changed. I describe some of these changes in the conclusion, but many lessons about identity processes, discontinuities in power across system settings, and the role of grounded participant narratives remain pertinent. The quality of programming for youth in child welfare across the United States continues to be of concern to many clients, advocates, and officials (Courtney, Dworsky, and Napolitano 2013; Courtney and Dworsky 2006). Further, the disconnection and animosity between sectors of child welfare (legal, policy, and programming) continue to block collective efforts at improving services for children and youth.

In addition to the disconnection across public systems of governance—including child welfare, housing, health care, and childcare—this book also explores the unequal relationship between administrative and programmatic settings within the child welfare system. I show how these bureaucratic inequalities actually construct client “failure,” and I shift the diagnosis of the problem from client attributes to system biases. I hope that this book will inspire conversations across diverse constituents. It should serve as one tool among others to reenvision governance systems, policies, and approaches that support the well-being of structurally disadvantaged youth and children. I do not want the book to be used to destroy the few public resources and services to which youth have access. Over and over, young mothers told me how the SIL program had saved their lives and how without it they would be either dead or locked up. I hope their portrayals chip away at a culture of fear and encourage better leverage of public and private resources.

### Foreseeing the “Unforeseen” Implications of Child Welfare Policies

This book reveals the ways the child welfare system compromises its own mission and how it fails to alleviate hardship in the lives of

young families. First, I demonstrate my findings that the child welfare system blocked youth from prospering through inequitable spatial divides between administrative settings and program spaces. Second, I bring into question the ideal of self-sufficiency and how it compelled youth and caseworkers to hide their structural insecurities. Third, I explore how conditions within the system caused a divisive culture of fear.

#### DISCONNECTED PROGRAM SETTINGS

I consider the different experiences of “street-level bureaucracy” among ground-level participants, including program managers, caseworkers, and clients (Lipsky 1980). Work conditions such as resource limitations, time pressures, and conflicting goals make it impossible for ground-level caseworkers to practice in ways that would meet official policies and ideals of care. Even though each group enacts “street-level” coping strategies, clients, caseworkers, and administrators form unique alliances and experience different expectations and stakes.

In SIL, inequalities between program settings and cumbersome bureaucratic procedures contributed to clients’ and caseworkers’ perceptions that upper-level administrators dictated rules without understanding the everyday lives of these clients and caseworkers. The state appeared to youth and caseworkers to be simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. Lynne Haney (2010) describes a contemporary neoliberal trend in which the government increasingly outsources public services to private for-profit or nonprofit organizations. Regulators use audits and documentation to oversee an agency’s service provision. Even as government has “devolved, decentralized, and diversified” (Haney 2010: 15), many scholars argue that it has not shrunk. Haney (2010: 16) characterizes hybrid agencies of government as “akin to satellite states—they circle and hover around the centralized ‘mother ship,’ relying on her for material survival, legitimacy, and authority.” In my study, multiple regulators oversaw each individual client’s case, which caused clients to feel demoralized because they had little recourse for failed care. Clients were unable to determine which provider was responsible for which aspects of their care. Subsequently, the diffuse nature of



governance meant that participants could not predict the repercussions for breaking the rules, which reinforced a culture of fear.

Upper-level SIL administrators included the financial officers, contract managers, grant writers, and directors who oversaw the SIL program and the other educational and residential programs offered by Visions. These upper-level administrators rarely if ever visited the SIL apartment sites. They occupied a “professional” business office with newly purchased furnishings and equipment. It was located in one of the city’s wealthier and whiter suburbs, a forty-minute drive from the city’s center. Most case managers were black women from the city, and most business office administrators were white women from the suburbs. Thus, the hierarchy within the agency mirrored and perpetuated the spatial, racial, and class-based divisions in the broader city.

Caseworkers struggled with how to oversee the “supervised” part of independent living because they worked in a hybrid environment. They did their jobs alongside the community members who lived in the apartment building and caseworkers had to deal with whatever violence or chaos this cohabitation created. Oversight was necessarily limited. Even though the official rules specified visiting hours and did not allow overnight visits, staff found it impossible to uphold these program rules. Before scheduled meetings with case managers, companions or family members could easily go from one apartment to another without being detected. Some youth would hide their visitors in their closets when they heard a knock at the door. Staff members were savvy to this tactic and would check closets or visit in pairs. One staff would knock on the apartment door and another would wait on the fire escape to catch the departing young man.

Staff did not universally uphold program rules. Some caseworkers broke rules for the more favored mothers. Or staff would give up the pretense of enforcing the no-visitor rule, accepting the reality that they could not control who entered and exited the community buildings. Some caseworkers found that their supervisors did not back up their efforts, so they stopped trying to follow the rules. Overall, many youth understood that certain staff members ignored the visitor policy, and their boyfriends and family members