



Opinion: Keeping children safe should never be compromised
Jonathan Thomas, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Feb. 1, 2023

As a former foster youth and a person of color, I am concerned that efforts to renew a federal law that exists to protect youth from abuse have repeatedly been delayed. Concerns have been expressed by biological parents and their allies that foster care systems demonize poverty and promote white supremacy and classism. The voices that are missing in national discussions regarding the renewal of this bill are those of young people who have experienced familial abuse personally.

The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act (CAPTA) provides federal funding to states to prevent and respond to child abuse and neglect. It requires states to facilitate mandated reporting and procedures to respond to ensure children's safety. This federal bill expired in 2015 and is still awaiting renewal.

Foster care is imperfect and many aspects of it can be improved. However, without foster care, my siblings and I would have continued to experience abuse without intervention. As a child, I often wished that someone would stop by my house and witness the abuse that my siblings and I were experiencing. I hear stories about other kids whose summers were filled with sunny day adventures. My summers were filled with abuse and fear.

Being placed in foster care created a seismic shift from the environment of my childhood. It gave me a new understanding that a home could be physically and emotionally safe. It provided me with a different mindset about relationships and what it means to be a man.

Claims have been made by family rights advocates that Children's Services has a hidden agenda to surveil and regulate families of color, for the purpose of taking more youth into care. What I've witnessed is the opposite: *Within the overworked foster care system, young people of color must often report their abuse many times before their voices are heard.*

The abuse that took place within my family was deeply ingrained and life-threatening. We were deliberately insulated from authorities by my father, and told, "What happens in the home stays in the home." It was my sister who found the courage to tell a teacher what was happening. Even after doing so, she had to take the next step and run away, to further demonstrate the danger of our living situation.

It's important to note that disproportionality among races within the foster care system exists -- but it does not exist within a vacuum. Our nation's housing, education, health care and policing systems are overshadowed by a history of racial inequities and racist practices. Addressing those structural issues will help improve outcomes for families of color. Linking families with services and resources can assist in many circumstances. But, in situations of abuse, the safety of youth can never be sacrificed.

As a survivor of abuse, I want to emphasize that children and teens of all races and ethnicities deserve to be protected. It is vitally important that youth safety remains first and foremost. Experiencing abuse as a child doesn't just impact your present – without intervention, it can undermine your future. At the very time as a child when you are developing autonomy, the abusive surroundings are robbing it from you.

When it comes to national conversations regarding the renewal of the CAPTA legislation, there is one more voice that hasn't and cannot be heard: The voices of children and teens who have lost their lives due to abuse.

A 2021 study by Case Western Reserve University's Schubert Center for Child Studies revealed that Cuyahoga County's "rate of confirmed abuse or neglect-related child deaths is significantly higher than the national average."

In my role as a Youth Ambassador for the OHIO YAB (Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board), I will continue to advocate for safeguards to protect today's young people. My goal is to leave a legacy of better and ongoing protections for those who experience abuse as a child.

~ Jonathan Thomas credits the foster-care system with turning around his life and that of his siblings after they suffered abuse as children and were removed into foster care. He currently serves as a youth ambassador for the Overcoming Hurdles in Ohio Youth Advisory Board, a statewide organization of youth ages 14 to 21 who've experienced foster care.