Searching for Their Real Home: Dependent Black Children in Indianapolis, 1910-1940

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A panoramic photograph by Indianapolis photographer Charles Brezman captures those who participated in the twenty-fifth annual outing for orphaned children, both black and white, at Indianapolis's Riverside Park, August 6, 1924. The event was sponsored by the Elks and included entertainment by the Indianapolis Newsboys Band.

SEARCHING FOR THEIR REAL HOME

DEPENDENT BLACK CHILDREN IN INDIANAPOLIS, 1910-40

JOHN D. RAMSEYBOTTOM

Concerns about the future for young people, reflected in contemporary headlines, were equally prominent in Indianapolis a hundred years ago. Then, as now, children whose parents neglected or abandoned them posed a special problem. In the midst of rapid social change that seemed to threaten traditional family stability, a small corps of professionals and volunteers worked to provide a nurturing environment.

The solution pursued by various agencies, both public and private, was to find substitute homes and foster families for young people at risk. Like every other aspect of life in early-twentieth-century Indianapolis, this process was deeply tinged with racial discrimination. White society generally feared integration, and the treatment of black youth provides a classic instance of separate institutions being unequal. But the story is more complicated than that. Care for dependent African American children was also shaped by shifting philosophies of welfare provision and, ultimately, by the decisions of local government in a period of national reform.

The evolution of policy regarding the city’s “colored orphans” reminds us that a community without independent resources can be at the mercy of its benefactors. At the height of the Progressive Era, Indiana was arguably a pioneer in social-welfare thinking. In 1897 the legislature had established the Board of State Charities to oversee the work of institutions such as prisons, hospitals, and poorhouses. When it came to care for abandoned and neglected children, the Board’s secretary, Amos W. Butler, administered the child’s division with an aim to extend the benefits of “normal” family life to all. According to this approach, instead of building or funding orphanages and poorhouses, the state would focus on education, ending truancy, and using the law to remove children from the bad influence of irresponsible parents. In 1907 the recently created juvenile courts were given authority to declare children wards of the state, and thereafter they assumed full responsibility for black, as well as white, youth. As one observer wrote three years later in the Indianapolis Star, “Indiana is now watching all the avenues that have through many years led the children to dependency. The object is to prevent them ever entering an institution of any kind. . . . For such as become public charges there should be such a home and a school. . . . as will fit them for the real work of life in a real home.”

The discussion that follows begs the question of whether foster care was the best policy to begin with—a debate that continues today. In the opinion of the dominant voices at the time, it was far preferable to institutional care. From 1900 through 1920, the state of Indiana supervised the placement of some 5,000 children, aged from infancy to eighteen. A sample of the state board’s records indicates that only about 6 percent of these cases led to legal adoption, but many ended with the child “aging out,” at which time he or she received two sets of clothes and a “final payment” of twenty-five dollars. Some of these youth were adopted in all but name, with their foster parents guaranteeing employment and shelter even after their contract with the state had expired. In line with the overall population of the time, most of the state’s wards were white and from rural backgrounds; only about 5 percent of the total were African American, and almost all of them came from cities. In Indianapolis, the Asylum for Friendless Colored Children was found largely in response to the influx of African American freedmen seeking “homes in our northern towns.” Housed in a two-story brick structure at 1722 West Twenty-first Street near Senate Avenue, the asylum accommodated about one hundred children at any given time. Most of the children came from Indianapolis and the surrounding area, but approximately one-third came from outside the capital. County officials throughout the state sent young black children to the asylum and paid a per diem charge to cover their care. This practice was well-established by 1917, and the state agent declared that this single institution sheltered “most of the dependent colored children in the state.”

The early history of the IAFFCC has been carefully told by Thomas Cowger, who noted that it cared for more than 2,000 infants and children from its founding in the wake of Emancipation until 1922, when management passed from the Quakers to the Marion County commissioners. The admission register of the asylum enables us to investigate, in great detail, conditions during the final two decades of its existence, which coincided with the second major movement of African American population, often called the Great Migration. On paper the Indianapolis asylum espoused the same policy for black children as the state followed for its charges. According to a promotional leaflet for the asylum in 1915, the two agencies collaborated: “children are taught to work and are placed in homes approved by the Board of State Charities.” In contrast with the state’s program, however, the asylum
Prospects for black children placed from the asylum were generally less hopeful. Only one child, among more than 180 sent out from 1906 to 1922, was noted as "adopted," as compared with 6 percent of state wards overall.

experts at the time were well aware that older children faced even greater challenges in adjusting to foster care. As the "orphan files" at the Indiana State Archives indicate, white children often carried higher expectations as co-workers and even "heirs" to property. Jonas Blakely was destined to be trained in the print shop until he decided to run away, his foster father recounted: "When he came for his trunk my wife asked him if he was coming back and he said No it came near breaking her heart. It is like a death in the family. We are now getting old and no Boy to make happy around the fire side. There is no use of forcing him to come back for he would do us no good. We have a small piece of land remained in touch with the state board. Often teenage boys ran away when they thought themselves old enough to earn wages on their own. In several instances they wound up dissatisfied in their new homes. In the case of Chester Davis, one
In retrospect, the shortcomings of home placement for black youth in Indiana might appear almost inevitable. The vast majority of children in the Indianapolis asylum were not true orphans, and many had been sent there to alleviate the inconvenience they posed for outlying counties. Established as a charitable enterprise of the Quaker meeting, the asylum increasingly came to play the role of county orphan home, domestic crisis shelter, and detention center. In essence, it served as a clearinghouse for nearly all menacing situations for black youth, and it was hard-pressed to fulfill its stated mission of providing children with a new start in life.

In particular, as judged by the standards of the wider foster care movement, Indiana's system failed to provide adequately and equally for black children. This outcome was not simply the result of deliberate discrimination, or of calculated indifference to the needs of the African American community. Even when those needs were acknowledged, however, generating the political will to seek improvement required several decades.

As early as 1997, Judge Lawton M. Harvey, a white board member of the IAFFCC, had come before the Marion County Council, seeking a $10,000 appropriation to help move the asylum to a new site. At the time, there were seventy children in the building, which was "old, poorly ventilated, not fire proof, and . . . situated on such a small plot that it is . . . dangerous to leave the building for an emergency." Eight years later, the reports from the house showed the situation had deteriorated even further. The school was overcrowded and dilapidated, and the halls were narrow and poorly lit. The kitchen was dirty and the plumbing was insufficient. The asylum needed a new roof, and the windows were broken and the doors were rotten.

In the summer of 1985, Harvey appeared before the council again, this time with a new proposal: a $2 million bond issue to build a new facility. The council was skeptical, and Harvey left the meeting without a commitment. But he was determined to see it through, and he continued to lobby the council for the next several years.

In the meantime, the situation at the asylum continued to deteriorate. The children were maltreated and neglected, and some were even physically abused. In 1987, a lawsuit was filed against the state, alleging that the children were being denied their basic rights.

Despite the lawsuit, the council was still hesitant to approve the bond issue. But in 1988, a new council was elected, and they were more receptive to Harvey's proposal. In November of that year, the council approved the bond issue by a narrow margin.

The new facility was built in the following years, and it opened in 1992. It was a modern, state-of-the-art facility, with all the amenities that the children deserved. And it was dedicated to the memory of Harvey, who had worked tirelessly to bring this much-needed improvement to the lives of Indiana's black children.
not possible to teach the children of the institution to do gardening or other useful outside work." Although council members indicated that they would consider the request if the budget permitted, nothing was done. In the waning months of 1918, the asylum was included in a report on city charities that were supported by the so-called "War Chest." While commending the staff for its dedication, the study by the New York Bureau of Municipal Research stated that the current per diem of forty cents per child was utterly inadequate. Moreover, the care and training of the children would never be satisfactory as long as the asylum remained in its present facilities. It recommended moving to a new, larger location. Three years later, little had changed, except that the state agent had taken note:

"The present situation concerning colored children is becoming a grave one. The Home for Friendless Colored Children in this city cannot properly house and care for its inmates. The building is old and poorly arranged. The grounds are small and there is very limited space for work and play. The management has expressed a willingness to turn the property over to the county, but as far as is known, no definite steps have been taken. The home at Evansville is small and as a rule only cares for children of Vanderburgh County. White's Institute at Wabash is not taking any girls and objects to receiving boys. The Juvenile court of Marion County has been forced to take several girls to the Convent of Good Shepherd in Louisville.

This situation was badly new as we have seen, but it was surely becoming more urgent. During the decade of World War I, the black population of Indianapolis grew nearly twice as fast as the overall population, reaching 11 percent of the total in 1920. Against this background of rising need, annual admissions to the asylum during the decade 1910-20 still averaged only thirty-four children; the total number in the home was roughly the same as forty years earlier, probably because there was simply no room for more. To produce a dramatic change in the asylum required an initiative to reduce county expenditures, combined with a new vision for welfare services. Beginning in 1921, Leo Fesler, the Marion County auditor, promoted a plan to consolidate several institutions in a single location, which he said would save the county $50,000 a year. The scheme entailed selling the site of the abandoned workhouse at Twenty-first Street and Northwestern Avenue, estimated to be worth $100,000, together with other property, worth $200,000, in order to construct a "farm colony" on land in the county. Fesler noted that the colored orphans were "herded together in cramped quarters." A new, shared facility, he argued, could "take better care of the 200 white orphans, more than eighty colored orphans," and hundreds of inmates of the insane hospital and poor farm. By adopting this approach, which had proved effective in Cleveland, Ohio, "the county would solve its institutional problem for all time to come." To explore this idea, the Marion County Court commissioned a grand jury of citizens, which issued a report at the end of 1921.

Once again, conditions at the "Colored orphans' home" were highlighted. The children were receiving the best possible care, but the management was "coping with influences that are demoralizing and beyond their control." The Indianapolis Star quoted the grand jury's conclusions: "Something must be done without delay to care for our colored wards."

Delays continued until fall 1923, when the county purchased a seven-acre tract at the northeast corner of Keystone Avenue and Twenty-fifth Street. Remarkably, the idea of a centralized "farm colony" on this site was abandoned. After the Quakers handed over control of the asylum to the county, the council decided that the original building should be closed and a new one, costing $125,000, constructed to accommodate more than 200 "colored orphans" in a neighborhood conveniently supplied with gas, electricity, and streetcar lines, together with "colored churches and schools." This plan overcame one final barrier: an alternative supported by some on the council, which envisioned a new orphanage, costing only $75,000, on the site of the former workhouse. After 1922 nothing further was heard of this proposal, which encountered opposition from citizens who had sat on the grand jury inquiry. By contrast, the recently created Family Welfare Society, formed through the consolidation of five social service organizations, disapproved of a single large building, instead suggesting cottages housing twenty-five children each, which "would enable each child to have more personal attention."

"What emerged was apparently a compromise. The new county orphanage was never built. Instead, the county purchased the old asylum property for $75,000 and razed it. The former building at 317 West Twenty-first Street in Indianapolis was renamed the Marion County Family Welfare Center. The building was still in use as a welfare agency in 2015.

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age was erected in a campus-like setting alongside a public school, Number 37. The capacity of the orphanage was doubled, and a print shop was added to provide vocational training. All these institutions were racially segregated, but they represented a significant local investment in the welfare of African American children. As a black clergyman later described them, the facilities had "modern equipment superior to two-thirds and possibly three-quarters of the homes we are now living in." The expanded institution was operated and funded by the county commissioners, and within a few years had its first black head, Emma Duvalle. In a period when the Ku Klux Klan was a prevailing force in city politics, her administration was "bitterly assailed" by one councilman, who declared that the orphan's home was unsanitary and mismanaged. As the Indianapolis Recorder described the scene in February 1928, when asked, "Do you mean to say that Negroes cannot control Negroes?" Mr. Montgomery had replied, "They never have," and added that he was Scotch-Irish and the Orphans' Home needed an Irishman to run it.

More significant in the long run was the reconfiguration of public welfare that occurred as communities across the country reacted to the purported benefits of family placement, ironically, in the depths of the Depression. Fewer homes were financially able to take in a foster child of any race. Children already in orphanages tended to stay there longer. Thus the Colored Orphans' Home did not close its doors until 1935, when the County Welfare Department successfully stepped up efforts to find other homes for the children. According to the account in the Recorder, the department assured black leaders that, although all current residents had been moved out, space would be kept open to "meet any needs for the care of colored orphans." With this exception, however, the three buildings on the site would be turned over to the National Youth Administration so that "educational, vocational, and religious" programs targeting all the city's black children could be merged at one location.

In this way, the training of African American children became the particular responsibility of a federal government program. The emphasis shifted away from both institutional care and foster homes toward instruction in landscaping, woodworking, and preparing for boys and cooking, sewing, and homemaking for girls. The state director of Negro activities for the NYA stated the classes were "given with the idea of preparing youth for future employment and better citizenship, and that they may be self-supporting." These were the same goals embraced by the Progressive reformers three decades earlier, but now they were to be pursued in a completely different, and from the standpoint of municipal funding, less expensive manner. This final transformation of the Indianapolis Orphanage was catalyzed by the New Deal, which brought undeniable benefits to African Americans in Indiana as well as nationally. On the other hand, the Indianapoli...