

This article traces the emergence of one variation in parental rights termination law as a way to understand the shift in foster care from a welfare service to an authoritative service. Using archival data collected from social workers and officials in New York City, I find that racial integration created a crisis in child welfare during the 1940s. Using a “governing mentalities” framework, I examine how state authorities drew on gendered scientific research about the developmental harms of maternal deprivation to understand the new Black and Puerto Rican foster population. At a time when many struggling parents willingly chose to foster their children, I show that welfare authorities framed these women as “uninterested mothers” who abandoned their gender obligations and prompted efforts to enforce maternal responsibility. Reformers passed the “permanent neglect” statute in the late-1950s to discourage long-term foster care use, and in doing so, reframed this service as temporary, punitive, and involuntary. The “uninterested mother” is an important racial myth about gender dependency in child welfare that contributes to our understanding of how scientific knowledge production undergirds the regulation of marginalized women in the American system of family governance.