



# MAPPING DISPARITIES FOR BLACK FAMILIES PROJECT

Overview of Findings Related to the Eligibility Spectrum  
INFORMATION SHEET #4 | 2025

## BACKGROUND & PURPOSE

Implemented across the province in 1998, the Eligibility Spectrum (ES) interpreted new standards in the Child and Family Services Act (CFSA) that expanded the definition of a child in need of protection as having been harmed by the actions or inactions of their caregivers as well as being at risk of such harm. Since its earliest iteration, the ES operationalized this risk to include concerns like exposure to intimate partner violence, child and caregiver conflict, and caregiver mental health concerns. After key shifts in policy and procedures in this period, the rate of investigations involving Black children quadrupled, leading to the first documented disparities in investigation rates between Black and white children in 2003. The ES is currently embedded in both policy and practice in this province, and Black children continue to be over-represented. The ongoing disparity at the “front door” of the child welfare system must be better understood, particularly in the ways that the ES influences practice with Black families from the perspective of the people who use it to make key decisions about who should be investigated, how those investigations are conducted, and how these families are served.

## WHAT WE DID

We explored how participants experienced the impact of the Eligibility Spectrum when working with and making decisions about Black families involved with the child welfare system by conducting semi-structured interviews and focus groups with 79 participants. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was used to explore the experiences of participants who work or have worked in child welfare, as well as those who influence policy and practice decisions affecting Black families involved in the child welfare system.



## WHAT WE FOUND

Participants in the study had a range of responses to the question of how they thought the Eligibility Spectrum influenced their practice and decision-making with Black families. The findings document participants’ understanding of the ES as driving their practice, the inherent tension between standardization and discretion, and the limitations of the ES, which contributed to its negative and disproportional impact on Black families and communities. Participants also described how they work to buffer those impacts and emphasized the need for revision and/or eradication of the ES. These findings have coalesced into three major themes, which are described in greater detail in our full report: *Mapping Disparities for Black Families Project: Findings Related to the Eligibility Spectrum*.

**Theme 1:**  
It's a Standard that Drives Everything We Do, but it's Still Subjective

**Theme 2:**  
The ES is a Narrow Lens that Dehumanizes Black Families

**Theme 3:**  
Circumvent, Revise, or Eradicate? Efforts to Address the Impact of the ES



## RECOMMENDATIONS



Reduce the power of the ES in practice with Black families.



Stop making allegations fit into the ES.



Reduce problematic coding practices.



Consider the context when assigning ES codes.



Consider the impact on children when assigning and investigating ES codes.



Consider ways to better use the ES to address the needs of Black families.



Better understand the impact of the ES on Black families.



Consider alternatives to the ES.

For more information about MDBF, please reach out to members of the project team:

**One Vision One Voice:**  
Vania Patrick-Drake  
(vpatrickdrakes@oacas.org)

**Research Team:**  
Bryn King (bryn.king@utoronto.ca)  
Travonne Edwards  
(travonne.edwards@torontomu.ca)

## SUGGESTED CITATION:

King, B., Edwards, T., Laylor, A., Chowdhury, R., Facey, K. & Patrick-Drakes, V. (2025). *Overview of findings related to the Eligibility Spectrum* (Mapping Disparities for Black Families Project Information Sheet #4). One Vision One Voice: Toronto, ON.