

## Title: Predictive Child Protection: Can AI Justify State Intervention in “High Risk” Families?

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### INTRODUCTION & AIM

- AI-driven predictive tools are being deployed across multiple jurisdictions to assess risk of child neglect, abuse, and family instability.
  - Proponents argue these tools improve efficiency and help protect vulnerable children before harm occurs.
  - Critics warn they embed structural inequalities and expand intrusive state surveillance of already-marginalized families.

Digital Governance Context

While the empirical focus centres on the United States, the analysis is situated within broader debates on digital governance — including Nigeria as an emerging policy environment where similar pressures may take root.

#### Research Aims & Central Questions

- Q1 — Does predictive AI enhance child welfare outcomes, or does it expand punitive surveillance under the guise of protection?
- Q2 — How does algorithmic risk scoring reshape the relationship between families and the state?
- Q3 — To what extent can regulatory frameworks mitigate discriminatory outcomes without constraining innovation?

### RESULTS & DISCUSSION

#### 01. AI Systems Are Not Neutral

Algorithms reproduce socio-economic biases embedded in administrative data. Poverty, race, and family structure become proxies for “risk,” encoding historical inequality into automated decisions.

#### 02. Surveillance Intensification

“High-risk” categorisation intensifies monitoring of already disadvantaged communities. Marginalized families face heightened scrutiny, compounding existing disadvantage rather than addressing its root causes.

#### 03. Structural Drivers Obscured

Systems divert attention from structural drivers of vulnerability: unemployment, housing insecurity, weak social protection by framing systemic failures as individual or family-level risk factors.

#### 04. Efficiency ≠ Ethical Legitimacy

Technological efficiency does not equate to ethical legitimacy. Algorithmic risk scoring reshapes the family-state relationship, raising fundamental questions about procedural justice and due process.

### METHOD

#### Qualitative Comparative Analysis

- Cross-jurisdictional comparison of AI child protection systems
  - Focus on US cases with comparative framing
  - Policy document review and case-based logic
- Document Analysis
- Secondary data from government reports & policy documents
  - Analysis of AI risk model design specifications
  - Review of academic literature and critical studies
- Critical Policy Framework
- Bridging family studies, public policy, and digital governance
  - Theoretical grounding in surveillance studies
  - Situated within social justice and equity frameworks

DATA SOURCES: US child welfare agency reports · Academic literature · Government policy documents · Algorithmic audit reports · Nigerian digital governance frameworks.

### CONCLUSION

The future of family policy depends on how societies balance child protection objectives with data governance standards and the preservation of fundamental family rights particularly in emerging policy environments such as Nigeria.

#### Technology Cannot Replace Ethical Judgment

Predictive systems must be subject to democratic oversight. Efficiency gains do not justify the erosion of family autonomy or due process rights.

#### Structural Inequalities Demand Structural Responses

AI tools that target individual families without addressing poverty, housing, and unemployment displace responsibility rather than reduce harm.

#### Regulatory Frameworks Are Necessary but Insufficient

Regulation can mitigate bias, but meaningful reform requires embedding equity, transparency, and accountability into system design from the outset.

### FUTURE WORK / REFERENCES

- Empirical fieldwork in Nigeria Primary data collection with child welfare practitioners and policymakers in Nigerian institutions to explore readiness for and risks of predictive governance adoption.
- Comparative international analysis Extend comparisons beyond the US to include the UK, Australia, and other jurisdictions with differing regulatory contexts and welfare regimes.
- Participatory co-design research Engage affected families and communities in evaluating and shaping AI governance frameworks — ensuring that impacted voices inform reform.
- Longitudinal impact assessment Track outcomes for families flagged by predictive systems over time to assess whether AI intervention improves or worsens long-term welfare.

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