

### **Public Inquiries into Abuse of Children in Residential Care**

*Corby, B., Doig, A. and Roberts, V. (2001) London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, £16.95, paperback, 224 pp.*

The abuse of children in residential care has been a major social (and criminological) issue which emerged in the late 1980s, continued throughout the 1990s and shows no sign of abating in the twenty-first century. Despite the subsequent media and official furore, there is a paucity of knowledge and literature on this subject, and if for no other reason, this book is to be welcomed.

As the title makes clear, this book is about public inquiries into the abuse of children in residential care. The book consists, in effect, of two quite distinct but dovetailing parts. 'Part 1' looks at inquiries from a very general perspective, examining the history of residential care (Chapter 1), the 're-discovery' of child abuse (Chapter 2), inquiries in other settings (Chapter 3), inquiries into community-based abuse (Chapter 4) and inquiries into institutional abuse (Chapter 5). The second part of the book focuses upon the North Wales Tribunal of Inquiry (NWTI) which examined allegations of abuse in Clwyd and Gwynedd between 1974 and 1996. It looks at the events leading up to the Tribunal (Chapter 6), issues of process (Chapter 7) and outcomes (Chapter 8). The book then returns to its more generalist approach, discussing the impact of inquiries on residential child care currently (Chapter 9) and the future of such inquiries (Chapter 10).

On starting to read this book, my first impressions were that the authors had chosen a subject which, while important, was unusually narrow. However, as I read on I began to appreciate the very considerable - and worthwhile - effort they had invested in locating residential abuse inquiries in the broadest of contexts. There is, all too often, a tendency for issues to be viewed in isolation and this can seriously handicap understanding. This is something the current authors have very definitely avoided and in doing so have produced something of a tour de force.

Given the broad sweep of this text, it is difficult, and would perhaps be unfair, to highlight particular messages. Chapter 1, for example, provides a potted, but valuable, overview of the development of residential care (from the Middle Ages). Besides being very informative, the chapter is full of challenging and thought-provoking ideas as to how the historical conditions of residential care might explain the abuse which took place in the last few decades. Discussing the original rationale for residential care for instance, the authors argue that it was 'to make living conditions worse inside than out; these were essentially places of punishment for being poor or places of reform for being bad' (p.26). Similarly, Chapter 6 can be seen as a classic case study of the all too common situation where allegations of abuse were covered up or inadequately investigated; Chapter 7 provides a useful synopsis of how the NWTI functioned - adopting an adversarial as opposed to the intended inquisitorial approach whereby 'All the classical strategies of cross-examination were used to discredit their [complainants'] accounts' (p. 139); Chapter 8 addresses the issue as to whether there was a 'conspiracy' in North Wales which included people in positions of power; and Chapter 10 contains an interesting discussion as to how the contribution made by inquiries might be improved.

That said, there are perhaps two key arguments in this book which should be highlighted. Firstly, that inquiries have come to play a major role in the development of residential child care (as they have in field social work); and secondly, while they have produced some valuable lessons for policy and practice, they have also had detrimental consequences (again, as they have in field social work).

It could be that some readers perceive the central subject matter of this book - inquiries - as being

too specific. However, the authors seek to explore this subject from such a range of perspectives, that the book provides a much broader discussion than might be imagined from the title. Thus, the book has a good deal to say about inquiries (in general, and in children's homes) but also residential care and institutional abuse.

Not surprisingly, this book will, in the main, appeal to those who have an interest in residential child care. However, this audience should be drawn from a wide range of backgrounds, including not only residential care staff, SSD managers, providers in the voluntary and independent sectors, and researchers, but also those who have any connection with local authority Chief Executive offices and increasingly, Mayors.

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