

Safety of Children in Care

By Beate Matthies, Chair, Auckland District Council of Social Services

One year ago, in February 2017, a group of prominent New Zealanders wrote an open letter in which they demanded an independent inquiry into historical state abuse of vulnerable people. With support from the *Human Rights Commission*, almost 12,000 signatures were collected. Stories of survivors of state abuse were recorded and presented to MPs.



According to the *Human Rights Commission*, at least 100,000 New Zealand children and disabled adults were taken from their families and held in state institutions between the 1960s and 1990s.¹ Keeping in mind that New Zealand at that time only had a population of about two to three million, this figure gains even more weight.

As victims are coming forward, more and more horrendous stories are being told. The abuse took place in institutions as well as in foster homes – sexual, physical and psychological abuse. Victims are asking to be heard, to be taken seriously and to receive an apology.

In July 2017, *The Guardian* wrote² that a study for the *UN Human Rights Commission* had been held on this concern and that the commission had:

“repeatedly called on the New Zealand government to follow the lead of the UK and Australia in conducting an independent inquiry into abuse in state institutions. [...] The government institutionalised disabled people at three times the rate of equivalent countries, the report states, with many subjected to beatings, sexual assaults, isolation and long periods of restraint.

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1. www.hrc.co.nz/news/un-recommends-nz-government-hold-independent-inquiry-historic-state-abuse
2. www.theguardian.com/world/2017/jul/27/study-finds-systemic-abuse-in-new-zealand-care-homes

In November 2017, *Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern* announced³ that there would be an independent inquiry into historical claims of abuse of children in State care.

A few weeks later, the *Ministry for Vulnerable Children (Oranga Tamariki)* published a report⁴ on the safety of children and young people in care. This report on the **Safety of Children in Care** is based on exploratory



research and was produced first by *Child Youth and Family (CYF)*, then by the *Ministry for Vulnerable Children*, and finally published on 28 November, 2017. The research took about one year and involved reviewing the case notes of a representative sample of 698 children / young people in care of *CYF* during 2015 - 2016. The nature of harm incidents and the extent of harm were examined across different placement types. The report refers only to children / young people in the statutory custody of the Chief Executive of *Oranga Tamariki*, e.g. whānau placement, return / remain home replacement, group home settings.

Children's Commissioner *Judge Andrew Becroft* estimates that three-quarters of *Youth Court* offenders have already been involved with *Child, Youth and Family's* care and protection arm. Some have been through 50 foster homes. In an interview⁵ he spoke of his experience as youth judge:



Judge
Andrew Becroft

“What struck me most was we weren't seeing naughty, irresponsible teenagers who needed a short, sharp shock and life would return to normal. These were almost universally young people who had been abused, treated violently, families that were highly transient, usually significantly disadvantaged, where drug use and alcohol were normative. There were tenuous connections with education – that really evaporated at about year 9 or 10. Boys without fathers, disconnected from their communities.

3. newzealandchildabuse.com/breaking-news-public-independent-inquiry-into-state-care-child-abuse-on
4. www.orangatamariki.govt.nz/news/innovative-report-highlights-the-importance-of-our-transformation
5. www.stuff.co.nz/national/crime/82092987/childrens-commissioner-andrew-becroft-on-catching-children-before-they-fall

The situation is alarming and cries out for action. The *Ministry* has been looking at different ways to prevent abuse, support the work of social workers, and listen to the voices of the children.

In the meantime, there are children who have been pushed around for years. Handed over from foster home to foster home – and changing families so often that the children had no time to bond and build up trust.

The New Zealand movie *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (based on the book *Wild Pork and Watercress* by Barry Crump) describes the situation of a boy who was changing foster homes constantly – until he started to bond. While the state care was trying to make sure that the boy would only stay with a person with a clean police record, the boy happened to bond with a person who had a past but, who had managed to turn his life around.

This boy is an example of so many children and young people who are disconnected from their communities, from their families, from their friends – if they have ever had the chance to build friendships and trust.



Photo: Chyanne Macaluso for His & Her Photography (Hisandherphotographyaz.com)

Many families have taken children into foster care, and studies in different countries show that about 50% of these children were able to return to their parents.⁶

In the US there is a campaign to motivate foster parents to adopt the children after a certain period of time. Pictures on the internet show happy children carrying signs like the one on the right.⁷

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6. www.adoptuskids.org/adoption-and-foster-care/overview/adoption-from-foster-care
7. www.adoption.net/a/adopting/blogs-adopting/we-never-planned-to-adopt-from-foster-care/32711

It is certainly not easy to become a foster carer today. The abuse that has happened in the past throws a dark shadow on the good hearts and the good will of foster parents. The protection and support has to be on both sides – for the caregivers and those in care.

Judge Becroft's comments are concerning. There can be many reasons for a frequent change of foster care, but the lack of a family feeling in these situations makes some people call out for a return to orphanages and institutions – in the hope that it would be easier to assess them regularly and the children or young people could build up relationships with other children.

Foster care, orphanages, institutions, adoptions – all of them could provide a safe home. However, they also had drawbacks. Some people have had good experiences. Some people have had bad experiences.

It is hard to decide what is best, and there is certainly not one solution to all cases.

It is to be welcomed that the current Government has announced its intention to investigate historic claims and to look at ways of how to prevent harm and discrimination.

The *Dalai Lama XIV* once said ...



“*A loving atmosphere in your home
is the foundation for your life.*”