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Book review

Book Title

The Criminalisation and Exploitation of Children in Care Multi-Agency Perspectives

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The Criminalisation and Exploitation of Children in Care focuses on responses to children and young people in residential and foster care who are at risk of criminalisation and/or exploitation and abuse. This is an important and complex issue that practitioners often have to navigate, with high stakes and without clear guidelines.

The book explores how children and young people who are care experienced can receive criminal charges both internally regarding incidents within their home but also externally, i.e. through incidents in the community. They present evidence that shows care experienced children and young people are more likely to receive criminal charges than those who are not. The book essentially aims to explain the key factors that contribute to the criminalisation and exploitation of children in care, and in turn what elements of multi-agency working can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes.

The book is in essence an in-depth research report exploring the authors' qualitative research, undertaken with 36 practitioners who were working within the context of Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) and collaborating agencies in a single county in the north of England. Prior to discussing the results of their research, they review the literature regarding care experienced children in England, and the factors involved in both the criminalisation and exploitation of these children. The review is comprehensive and will prove useful to anyone interested in the subject. They also provide a thorough review of multi-agency working in an English context and highlight the familiar finding that most serious case reviews following harm to children call for agencies to work together more effectively. They describe the MASH model as a response to this and the barriers it has faced in implementation and practice which will be familiar to anyone who has worked in a multi-agency context.

The results of the research are explored across approximately 60 pages and provide a level of depth that will be of interest to those studying the field. They split their findings between criminalisation and exploitation. Regarding criminalisation: they highlight how participants identified systemic problems that provide a context for the increased criminalisation of young people. These included the marketisation of care and how this can lead to underconfident and poorly paid staff. Also, participants viewed the police as making decisions that

felt defensive and risk averse. The authors conclude that the care system exacerbates the vulnerabilities of children in its care, rather than successfully supporting them to overcome their challenges and thrive. Regarding exploitation: the authors describe participants' views of further systemic problems that contribute to exploitation. These include the difficulties involved in providing permanent and protective relationships over the long term, and the apparent dichotomy of profit-making and safeguarding. They conclude that the failure of the state to protect children amounts to system abuse. Some, if not all, of the themes and factors described across both criminalisation and exploitation are likely to resonate for many workers in residential and foster care. Hearing about others who have difficulty navigating systemic difficulties may be reassuring for readers, as well as perhaps dismaying.

The authors look at whether multi-agency and specifically MASH teams are one of the answers to reducing criminalisation and exploitation. They conclude that the idealised version of multi-agency working is very different from the real practice due to limited resources, turnover of staff and conflicting agendas from different agencies.

The actions the authors call for in response to all their findings are numerous. Regarding criminalisation they ask for a review of private providers of residential care and a shift to high quality public provision. They also suggest that the instability of care due to children moving homes are ultimately due to an insufficient provision of excellent care due to an ideological retreat from residential care. As a response they suggest that residential care should not be a last resort and be seen instead as a positive and preferred choice where the needs of the child indicate it. They suggest that the low-status and risk averse nature of English residential care contributes to the quick and normalised involvement of the police in minor criminal matters. They view a root cause of this as inadequate staffing numbers and training and contrast it with the highly educated and high-status social pedagogues in Northern European residential settings. The authors call for government to enhance the status of residential care rather than 'abandoning responsibility for outcomes to the for-profit concerns that currently monopolise the sector'.

Their calls to action regarding exploitation focus on improving multi-agency collaboration and highlight the Contextual Safeguarding approach that has been implemented in a few sites, including since the book was published. They ultimately conclude that the best practice occurs in those collaborations where the most trusting relationships were established. The parallels between this and the importance of relationships in effective residential care are clear and reassuring.

The book is an excellent review of the issues at a strategic and policy level. It will be invaluable to those studying the subject or involved in strategic decisions regarding exploitation and criminalisation both in England and Scotland. Readers who are seeking practical and front-line advice are likely to be disappointed but could still find the reflections and themes salient, familiar, and perhaps useful to guide their own individual thinking and practice.

The publisher of this book supplied a free e-copy for review.

About the author

Dan is a forensic psychologist who has worked in residential and secure care for over ten years. He has completed research including that which seeks young people's views on their experiences of care. He is currently working to increase trauma informed care in residential and education services.