

These questions will resonate very close to home. Michael McKenna in *The Australian* has been covering the case of a teacher at a Queensland Catholic primary school who allegedly abused 13 girls (see, for example, McKenna 2008). In 2007, McKenna reports, a Year Four girl told her parents and then the school principal of the 'touching' by the teacher. It is alleged that no report was made to police or anyone else:

Over the next year, at least 12 other girls, some who naively tried at times to disguise themselves to avoid the teacher's attention, allegedly suffered an onslaught of abuse. This involved vaginal and anal digital penetration and oral sex, as they were each called to the teachers desk or held back after class. It came to light only when another girl went directly to police with her allegations of abuse, 14 months after the first girl made the complaint to the school ... (McKenna 2009:13).

Marks refers to other scandals: the so-called spiritual community Centrepoin in New Zealand, the cult of the 'Little Pebble' in New South Wales, and the self-appointed leader of the Swan Valley Nyungah camp in Perth.

That is what is particularly disturbing about this book. It is clear that even in the late 20th or early 21st century, it is possible to abuse large numbers of children, silence the victims, and maintain secrecy for long periods.

Pitcairn is an isolated island but the abuse is not an isolated example of the cruel sexual exploitation of children. There are many adults, even on mainland Australia, who cover up such abuse.

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Chris Goddard's latest book, with Linda Briskman and Susie Latham, *Human Rights Overboard: Seeking Asylum in Australia* (Scribe, 2008), was awarded the Human Rights Literature Non-Fiction Award.

AFTER THE ORPHANAGE

Suellen Murray, John Murphy, Elizabeth Branidan
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UNSW Press, Sydney, 2009

Over the past decade, a number of government reports, including most notably the 2004 *Forgotten Australians* study, have brought the experiences of Australians who experienced institutional or out-of-home care to public attention.

This book by four Victorian academics builds on these earlier reports by documenting the specific experiences of 40 people who grew up in Catholic orphanages in Victoria and left care between 1945 and 1983. Twenty-one were men and nineteen were women, with their ages varying from 42 to 75 years. Some were in care from birth until they left at 14 years of age, others were in care for shorter periods. But all spent at least three years in care, and over half were in care for at least ten years.

In contrast to the *Forgotten Australians* study, which painted an overwhelmingly negative picture of out-of-home care, the experiences of this group appear to have been very diverse. Some enjoyed supportive placements and moved successfully into mainstream employment, social networks and loving relationships. Others were disempowered and

even traumatised by their time in care, and left with serious health and emotional deficits.

The book begins with a discussion of the first day they left care. Some experienced an abrupt and sudden departure from a large, regimented institution to a liberating but scary outside world with little or no safety net. Some described this accelerated transition to independence as cruel and rejecting. But others were given more planned and caring transitions, and moved into structured apprenticeships or domestic service positions. Those who left care in the earlier post-war period found a vibrant labour market with lots of opportunities for young workers, but later care leavers in the 1970s seem to have encountered greater barriers to workforce entry.

The second chapter explores the range of reasons why they entered care. None were legally orphans. One contributing factor was the death or serious ill-health of the mother, many of whom suffered from psychiatric illness. Another factor was illegitimacy given the stigma of unmarried motherhood, and the absence of financial support. This situation would change in the early 1970s with the introduction of the Single Mothers' Pension. A third factor was family breakdown and/or desertion. And a fourth factor was neglect, generally associated with alcoholism, family violence and/or poverty.

Most of the children had some contact with members of their family whilst in care, but often contact with unmarried or

allegedly 'immoral' mothers was discouraged by the nuns. Contact with other siblings in care was also often discouraged, although many strong relationships were nevertheless maintained. In the 1970s, practices changed for the better, and sibling groups were generally kept together.

Some of the care leavers struggled to develop a clear sense of self and identity. They spoke of a narrative of lost origins, and attempted to access care records to fill in the gaps. Others had come into care at an older age and had clear recollections of their family of origin and the often traumatic reasons for their entry into care. Identity was also framed by experiences in care which varied from the positive to the negative. Some recalled the depersonalisation of the large institutions, others recalled an obsession with accessing food which led to eating disorders, and many felt shamed and stigmatised by growing up in care. The most traumatic experiences involved sexual abuse and assault by carers.

The care leavers also described diverse experiences around forming and maintaining intimate relationships and a family of their own. Some women experienced negative relationships marked by physical, emotional or sexual abuse. But the majority of care leavers appear to have found positive relationships that provided relative happiness and contentment. Nevertheless many struggled to refine basic living skills around budgeting and nutrition.

Fortunately none of the care leavers lost their own children to the care system. Most related positive stories of how they coped as parents, and credited their partners and other family members for providing support and role modelling.

The care leavers also presented diverse experiences of education and work. Most had received a basic education in care, and many had later undertaken further study to expand their skills and qualifications. Most had retained paid work across their adult lives, and only a small number had relied on income security. Some remained in unskilled work, but others moved into professional careers. Many had health issues with dental health concerns being the most common. A significant minority also had serious mental health problems associated with the effects of institutional life generally, and childhood sexual abuse in some cases.

The care leavers related diverse experiences in 'returning' to family members or the institution. Some had successful reunions with parents and siblings, others remained estranged. Some were interested in retaining or re-establishing friendships with other children or even former staff from the homes, whilst others had very negative memories and wanted no further contact. More than half had requested their institutional and/or departmental records as a means of connecting their present with their past. For some these records were informative and emotionally empowering, but for others they proved painful and distressing.

The authors consistently remind us that their interviewees may not be representative of all care leavers of that period given that they were recruited via contact with three welfare or advocacy organisations. Hence it is possible that the study missed out on two groups of people: those who simply

moved on to lead successful lives and cut all contact with their childhood, and also those who were so traumatised by their 'care' experiences that they ended up homeless, incarcerated or dead.

Nevertheless, the study provides us with a compelling picture of the life stories of those people who grew up in the institutional care system. It also reminds us that the sole purpose of out-of-home care is to provide better life opportunities for children and young people than those offered by their natural parents. We need to ensure that our contemporary care systems learn from the positives and negatives of the past, and particularly that the 'corporate' parents of today continue to provide ongoing support for young people after they have left the 'state parent' home.

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