

## Improving Outcomes for Looked After Children on Both Sides of the Atlantic: What goes well? What goes badly? What can be improved?

### Child welfare within the context of overall social policy

- American social policy is residual in nature, providing fairly extensive support to certain categories of the population (e.g., persons with disabilities; the aged) while offering only the bare minimum of support to working parents in order to promote independence and discourage dependency on the state. This means that there is no guarantee of income support or housing assistance and no guarantee of health care, except in an emergency. This wider context influences who enters the child welfare system, what is available when they enter, and what they lose when they exit
- The delivery of personal social services in the United States is decentralized. Administration is at state and county rather than at national level. This allows for experimentation but contributes to inequities in service provision
- Virtually all long-term and most short-term out-of-home care in the United States is court supervised
- English child welfare policy is influenced by both the United States and Europe. Some policies, such as Welfare to Work, with its emphasis on economic independence and personal responsibility, are imported from America. Others, such as Every Child Matters, with its emphasis on strengthening universal public services in order to improve the wellbeing of all children, are more closely related to the social democratic policies developed in the Scandinavian countries.
- England has a much more centralised system than America in that policy is developed by central government and then implemented by local authorities. However rates of entry to care, length of stay and the extent to which different types of placement are used all vary widely – between authorities, between areas, and even between teams.
- In contrast to America, in England there is a long tradition of voluntarily accommodating children with the agreement of their parents: 65% of children and young people who *enter* care do so under voluntary agreements, although about 70% of those who *stay* in care are compulsorily separated from their families.
- Until relatively recently in England placements were almost all provided by the public or the voluntary sectors. The part now played by the private sector has yet to be fully evaluated and understood.
- In England the Children Act 1989 provides the legal and regulatory framework for interventions by the state in families where children are identified as being 'in need'. One of the most significant and far-reaching features of this Act was

its introduction of theories of child development into the rationale for the provision of services. The view that the purpose of providing services for children in need should be to ensure that they have adequate opportunities for satisfactory development is reinforced by the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, to which the United Kingdom is a signatory. The current focus on earlier intervention and greater integration of services is a logical consequence of adopting this perspective.

- Since 1997, English child welfare policy has been set within an inclusive, normative framework articulated by policy initiatives such as Quality Protects and Every Child Matters, that focuses on promoting wellbeing, safeguarding from harm and narrowing the gap between the achievements of the most vulnerable children and their peers. This has had a beneficial impact on the provision of services for children in care. However the emphasis on promoting children's wellbeing in child welfare policy can be at odds with the focus in youth justice policy on reducing the risks of offending behaviour and mitigating the effects of crime.
- England and the United States place far more children for adoption than most other countries. In England, recent policies to increase adoption and reduce delays in achieving permanence have been controversial, but there is no research evidence to support allegations that children are systematically separated from their parents in order to meet government targets.

### **What goes well in the USA...?**

- There is an increasingly clear focus in policy and practice on accountability for the safety, permanency, and well-being of children taken into care. For example, the 1997 Adoption and Safe Families Act created national standards against which state performance is measured and fiscal penalties are imposed on states for substandard performance. This has led child welfare jurisdictions to pay much more attention to concrete outcomes for children in care (e.g., time to reunification with family; reentry to care after reunification; time to adoption; placement stability).
- There is a strong focus in policy and practice on foster youth in transition to adulthood
- The data infrastructure is improving, with nearly all states now having the capacity to use administrative data to follow children's progress through the child welfare system from child maltreatment report to exit. The capacity of state and local child welfare authorities to make use of data they hold is also improving rapidly.
- There is an improved infrastructure for training and post qualification support for social work and legal professionals

- A number of evidence-based interventions and practices have been introduced into the field. Some of these, such as Multi-Dimensional Treatment Foster Care and Multi-Systemic Therapy are now being piloted in England, as well as in other parts of Europe.
- Young people are now involved in every aspect of policy and practice development

### **What goes well in England?**

- Children looked after by local authorities are beginning to benefit from policies designed to improve the wellbeing of all children. There is evidence, for instance, that in some areas initiatives to promote access to higher education for the most disadvantaged young people, are having a beneficial impact on care leavers
- There is some evidence that children and young people in care are also benefiting from closer attention to outcome based accountability and performance management
- There are some signs that children and young people in care may be benefiting from improved inter-agency working; there is evidence of better sharing of corporate responsibilities between the different departments of some local authorities
- Self report studies suggest that the majority of those children and young who have left care think that they have benefited from the experience.

### **What goes poorly in the USA?**

- The residual nature of social policy means that the child welfare system does things it should not do and fails to do things it should. For example, the absence of comprehensive children's mental health services in the U.S. means that the child welfare system has become the de facto children's mental health services system in many places, requiring families to inappropriately seek mental health services for their children from a system intended to respond to abuse and neglect
- There is still too little coordination across service sectors/systems
- Child welfare reform litigation too often leads to ineffective judicial micromanagement of child welfare services. In some jurisdictions courts have imposed long lists of procedural requirements on child welfare practice when there is little or no evidence that the procedures involved are positively associated with child safety, permanency, or well-being. Well-being (e.g., education, mental health, social relations) too often takes a back seat to safety and permanency

- Instability is a serious problem, as is running away from care
- Most child welfare practitioners have inadequate education and training
- Families and children of color experience disproportionately poor outcomes
- Outcomes for youth who transition from care into adulthood remain poor

### **What goes badly in England?**

- As in the United States, instability is a major problem, always raised in self-reports from children and young people, and a matter of concern to practitioners and their managers as well as policy makers. The experience of transience has a major impact on children and young people's education, health care, friendship networks, and also on their sense of identity.
- In spite of substantial policy and practice development in recent years, as in the United States, returns home and transitions to independence are not always well supported
- The care population is very heterogeneous. The care system operates at a fairly basic level. It can provide a reasonable service for children who do not have additional support needs, but it is not usually geared to provide adequate specialist support for those children and young people who have more extensive needs – thought to be about 70% of the care population.
- Emotional and behavioural support is often inadequate and inconsistent
- Children and young people with extensive emotional and behavioural difficulties who also commit offences tend to enter care at an older age than others; their care careers are shorter but they cost the most, and they appear to benefit least.
- Children and young people particularly appreciate those practitioners with whom they develop a personal relationship and those foster carers who welcome them as part of their family. There is a danger that increased professionalisation of the service may reduce the personal touch which children find so valuable.

### **What can be improved in the USA?**

- Federal and state social policy needs to be better coordinated across policy domains. We need more state-level examples of cross-system coordination. For example, state child welfare agencies need to better coordinate their efforts on behalf of foster youth making the transition to adulthood with state agencies responsible for workforce development and higher education.

- We need more resources for development of the child welfare workforce
- We need more resources for research on the operation of child welfare systems
- We need to integrate evidence-based programs into ongoing child welfare practice and systems
- There needs to be greater appreciation of the importance of family connections, including parents, grandparents, and siblings, in the lives of young people in care and leaving care

### **What can be improved in England?**

- As in the United States we need more resources to train a highly skilled workforce and develop a more specialist system that can respond flexibly to the heterogeneous needs of the care population
- We need to monitor children's progress more effectively: when compared against a baseline, outcomes are not always as disappointing as they sometimes appear.
- We need to make better use of specialist programmes such as MTFC, and develop some of our own.
- We need to listen more to children and young people who have experience of care and take better note of what they say
- We need to adopt a systematic approach, viewing care as one element in a continuum of family support services, rather than as a separate entity
- As in the United States, we need to coordinate policies, addressing those issues such as adult alcohol and substance abuse, mental health problems and domestic violence that precipitate children and young people into care, as well as trying to improve the system itself.

Mark Courtney  
Executive Director, Partners for Our Children  
Ballmer Endowed Chair for Child Well-Being  
University of Washington School of Social Work

Harriet Ward  
Director, Centre for Child and Family Research  
Loughborough University,  
England