

Child abuse in Britain: Young girl's death highlights cutbacks in social services

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Earlier this month, the guardians responsible for the brutal death of eight-year-old Anna Climbie were jailed for life. Anna died from hypothermia and malnutrition in February last year, after suffering two years of terrible violence and neglect at the hands of her “carers”—her great aunt Marie Therese Kouao (44) and her boyfriend Carl Manning (28).

Anna's tragic fate raises disturbing questions about the protection of children who are at risk of abuse in Britain.

The little girl had been kept naked except for a bin liner; she was bound hand and foot, in a bath for up to 24 hours a day, even in the depths of winter. Fed on scraps, she was also subjected to repeated beatings by Manning. At the time of her death, Anna had 128 marks on her emaciated body.

Anna, whose real name was Adjo, was originally from the Ivory Coast. The African country is extremely poor, life expectancy is low and more than 40 percent of women over 15 years of age are illiterate.

Her parents are extremely poor and had hoped that by sending Anna to live with her great aunt, the little girl would have a better life. In 1998, Marie Therese Kouao—a French citizen—took Anna with her to France. In March 1999, the pair came to live in Britain and Kouao approached both Ealing and Haringey Councils for help with housing. She was turned down by both local authorities, who argued that Kouao had made herself “intentionally homeless” by leaving France, and was given money to return there.

Instead, Kouao met and began living with bus driver Carl Manning, in his single room apartment in Tottenham, London. Manning claimed the eight-year-old Anna was Satan, and repeatedly beat her, also using weapons on the child. His belief that Anna was “possessed” was allowed to flourish by a series of

evangelical churches the child was regularly taken to. One had even organised a church service to “cast out the devil” from Anna.

Even though she suffered such a disturbing home life, Anna's death could have been prevented.

The little girl was referred to Haringey social services by a child minder, concerned at scars on her body. In total, three local authorities and the police all had contact with Anna for up to eight months before her death. Moreover, she had twice been admitted to hospital, where medical staff also expressed concern that the child was being abused. However on every occasion she was returned home, into the hands of her tormentors.

At the trial of Kouao and Manning, the court heard that a statutory visit to Anna's home by social services and the police after the child had returned from one hospital visit was cancelled for two weeks. Apparently, out of fear they might catch scabies from the child. When the visit did take place, no interpreter was present and so Anna, who could not speak English, could not be interviewed.

The media has lamented the “crisis in welfare” and latched onto the failings of Anna's social worker, Lisa Arthurworrey, holding her responsible for the child's death. Politicians joined in, with the Conservative Party adding its weight to calls by several children groups for the government to appoint a Children's Commissioner. The same newspapers have generally been the most vociferous in demanding even greater cuts in welfare services, especially those deemed “undeserving”. Yet those most in danger of neglect and protracted abuse are children from poor or dysfunctional families.

However, very little has been said about the severe lack of resources faced by most social services departments. In several cases this underfunding has

forced them to close their “Child Protection Registers”, kept by local social services departments on children about whom there is a serious concern of abuse or neglect, for several months at a time.

The media have also played a key role in creating a political climate in which refugees and asylum seekers are treated like pariahs and are denied many fundamental rights. The same newspapers that shed crocodile tears over Anna's death have previously insisted immigrants should not have access to health care in Britain. As a poor, “illegal” immigrant—Anna's papers were forged and she was not even registered at a local school—the child faced even greater obstacles in receiving proper treatment at the hands of the various authorities she did come into contact with. The right wing *Daily Mail* cynically used the young girl's death to revive their demands for passport checks on all those accessing health and welfare services.

Nobody had intervened in Anna's case, the newspaper went on to claim, because of “political correctness”. The police and social services had not wanted to ask too many questions, for fear of being labelled “racist”, the tabloid claimed, even though both the social worker and police officer involved dealing with Anna were black.

The terrible outcome in Anna's case highlights the human cost of the gutting of social provisions by successive governments. Social work has been a particular target. In part because it is often concentrated amongst the most disadvantaged sections of society—those who are least able to make their voices heard—and so is regarded as the most political expedient area for cuts.

There is a national shortage of social workers, with one fifth of all positions in London being unfilled. Since 1996, there has been a 13 percent drop in those being trained for the job. Consequently many posts are filled with temporary agency staff, who do not have the same level of training as full-time professionals, nor are they able to develop the same familiarity with their cases.

Anna's social worker was a relatively inexperienced new recruit. She was trying to manage a very large workload of 18 cases, instead of the normal 12. With little or no support for such a heavy caseload, senior management at Haringey Social Services had instructed her to close Anna's case.

In the wake of the conviction of Kouao and Manning, the Health Secretary Alan Millburn has ordered a Statutory Inquiry into Anna's death. Haringey Council has been placed under “special measures”, which involve being closely monitored by the Social Services Inspectorate. Eight police officers are also under internal investigation and the case has been referred to the Police Complaints Authority.

There have been a string of high-profile child abuse cases going back decades, and numerous detailed reports into the failing of care agencies. In 1973, seven-year-old Maria Colwell died at the hands of her mother and stepfather. Her tiny body was severely bruised and weighed just 15.8 kilograms; the autopsy showed her stomach was empty. The inquiry that followed led one commentator to say it signalled “the beginning of modern political, public and professional interest in child abuse”.

However, such cases are still an all-too frequent occurrence: there are presently 40,000 children on Child Protection Registers in England and Wales. It is estimated that two children die each week as a result of ill-treatment, often at the hands of a family member.

The inquiry into Anna's death will most probably have as little effect as those that have preceded it. Outside of addressing the chronic lack of resources for child welfare and, just as importantly, society's attitude towards vulnerable and disadvantaged children, it will not be the last.



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