

# UK report reveals yet another scandal of children in care

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Of the 65,000 children in care, 10,000 ran away or went missing last year, leaving them open to abuse and exploitation.

Speaking of a June 18 parliamentary report, Ann Coffey, the Labour MP who chairs the all-party group for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, said, “There is a scandal going on in England involving children missing from care—and until recent cases of child sexual exploitation in Rochdale and other places put the spotlight on this issue—it was pretty much going unnoticed.”

The Children’s Society CEO Matthew Reed said, “It is unacceptable that some of this country’s most vulnerable children are being completely let down by the very systems that should be there to protect them from these shocking crimes.”

In a cynical attempt to downplay their own culpability, MPs have yet again branded the British child care system as “not fit for purpose,” and called for an independent inquiry into the system’s failings. The report calls for action to track when and where children go missing, restrictions on local authorities sending children long distances from where they live, and demands that the regulator Ofsted takes into account missing children when it audits homes. Currently Ofsted can give a “good” score to a home with high numbers of runaway children.

Despite Coffey’s claims of ignorance, the *Daily Telegraph* reported in May that both Greater Manchester police and social services were fully aware of the sexual exploitation of dozens of young girls in Rochdale for over a decade, and failed to act. The victims in the Rochdale case were groomed, incapacitated with drugs and alcohol before being raped by a gang of local men and trafficked for sex around the north-west of England. All of the

victims, some as young as 13, had been known to social services, including one of whom was living under the care of the local authority at the time.

When compared to the national average, the proportion of those children reported missing or running away from care homes in the Manchester region is staggering.

An investigation undertaken by *Manchester Evening News* last year uncovered huge numbers of children absconding from local authority residential care. The findings highlighted that in 2010 over 12,000 missing children’s reports were made to Greater Manchester police, 5,598 of which related to children living within the child care system in the city and surrounding region.

For Coffey, the chair of the committee for Runaway and Missing Children and Adults, to say the situation had gone unnoticed begs the question: what exactly are these well-paid people doing with their time? Countless state run children’s homes across the country were shut down during the 1970s and 1980s due to widespread cases of sexual abuse of children placed in their care. However, the systematic abuse of children in care didn’t end and continued throughout the 1990s. In 1999, a report published by the Department of Community Paediatrics from St. James University Hospital in Leeds, “Abuse Of Children In Foster And Residential Care,” highlighted a case study of children in the care of Leeds Local Authority. Most of the children, some 80 percent, had been abused prior to entry into the care system.

During the study, which took place over a five-year period from 1990-1995, 191 episodes of physical and/or sexual abuse were reported by 158 children. In foster care, 42 children were physically abused, 76 were sexually abused, and 15 experienced both forms of abuse. In residential care, 12 children were physically abused, six

were sexually abused, and six experienced both forms of abuse. A significant proportion of abuse was severe, with one death, eight children with burns, 18 with genital penetration, and 34 with anal penetration.

The study indicated that foster children were seven to eight times, and children in residential care six times, more likely to be assessed by a pediatrician for abuse than a child in the general population. The report concluded that “children in foster or residential care form an at-risk group for maltreatment. Their special needs include additional measures to protect them from abuse.”

In 2000, the “Lost in Care” report published by the Waterhouse Inquiry into the sexual abuse of young children in local authority care in Wales recommended a major overhaul of the system. The inquiry was established under the Conservative government of John Major in 1996, after allegations that sexual and physical abuse of children in the care of Welsh authorities had been covered-up by politicians and police. Social workers, care home staff, local authorities and the Welsh Office were severely criticised. But the inquiry absolved the police and authorities of any cover-up. The police immediately announced that there would be no further prosecutions.

The Waterhouse Inquiry found a lack of financial resources for children’s services, a lack of suitable staff forced to work long hours on low pay and failure to carry out adequate inspections. The inquiry heard how a group set up in 1997 by the Welsh Office—the Adrienne Jones Report Implementation Group—to implement recommendations on childcare facilities had run into financial difficulties.

The tribunal report drew attention to the increasingly authoritarian attitude taken towards children, criticising the political and media campaign to present childhood difficulties as the result of some innate “evil” or failing on the individual’s part. It noted how the trend towards retribution rather than rehabilitation had developed since the 1960s.

None of the underlying issues raised by the inquiry were addressed. Then-Labour Prime Minister Tony Blair wrung his hands at the “appalling catalogue of terror and tragedy inflicted on some of the most vulnerable children in our society,” while then Conservative Party leader, now Foreign Secretary, William Hague demanded the

privatisation of children’s homes.

The Labour government duly obliged. It established “league tables” for England’s 150 social services authorities and where they were found to be “underperforming”, private operators were brought in. As a result, alongside an expansion of “cheaper” foster care and adoption provision portrayed as a more progressive alternative, profit driven institutions emerged which now receive an estimated £1 billion of public money.

Today, three-quarters of England’s 1,810 registered care homes are run by the voluntary or private sector. At an average cost of £200,000 per child, privatised childcare has become a lucrative business. Stockport is home to 43 privately-run children’s homes—the second highest number in the country. Last year some 2,000 cases of missing children were reported to the police from those homes.

The financial incentive for privatised children’s homes not to report children missing from care has now become a very real possibility. If, as the report suggests, Ofsted was to base its assessment of the quality of care given in children’s homes upon the level of children absconding, a large number of homes would be put out of business.

To suggest large numbers of children are running away simply out of a self-willed desire to misbehave is too simplistic an analysis. Running away is driven by a need to escape an appalling situation.

What children in care want and need more than ever is a system that values their needs, instead of viewing them a problem to be dealt with. To suggest such a set-up can be implemented based upon the principal of free market economics is politically and indeed morally bankrupt.



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