

The Homes from Hell? Media Perceptions of Residential Child Care

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Introduction

For the vast majority of the population, residential child care is not an area of direct personal experience. In Scotland, fewer than 1600 children are in residential accommodation (Scottish Executive, 2002), representing 14% of the population of looked-after children, and only about one child per 730 of the under-eighteen population.(Scottish Office, 1996) For most people, impressions and opinions about residential care will tend to be shaped by the popular media rather than by direct knowledge.

It is widely recognised that the media have a tendency to categorise and stereotype that which is unfamiliar:

The world presented by the popular Press, like the world we feel we live in, is a culturally organized set of categories, rather than a collection of unique individuals.... In so far as we regard the category of person as displaying strongly predictable attitudes or behaviour, the category may harden into a stereotype, an extremely simplified mental model which fails to see the individual features, only the values that are believed to be appropriate to the type. (Fowler, 1991, 92)

There has long been an impression, on the part of those who work in the field, that the British press presents a hostile picture of social work, including residential care for children and young people, which is reflected not only in the tone of presentation of reports, but also in the choice of stories which receive coverage. (Franklin, 1998; Aldridge, 1994) Some writers, however, have argued that the impression of unfair press coverage of social work is more illusory than real, and that other professional groups also feel that they are unfairly treated. (Aldridge, 1990, p.611-12) Children and young people who are looked after also feel a sense of stigma from the press(Who Cares? Scotland, 2001). Since newspapers are commercially driven, they give prominence to stories which will sell papers – ‘to entertain and titillate’ a large audience (Aldridge, 1999, p.102) – rather than report positively on a sector which has only a small impact on society.

Methodology

Since the spring of 2001, library staff of the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care have monitored over thirty online newspapers and news services for stories in which some aspect of residential child care has been featured. The stories have covered a wide range of topics which include community reaction to the building of

residential units, court cases involving staff and/or residents, and historical pieces about particular organisations. SIRCC monitors a mixture of broadsheet and tabloid newspapers and a spread of Scottish national press, UK national press, local papers from all areas of Scotland, Sunday press (UK and Scottish), and online news services. For the purposes of this paper, a six-month period– from July to December 2001 – was selected and the newspapers surveyed were (with one exception) online editions.

Articles were given a subject classification which broadly follows the contents and layout of the ‘Skinner Report’, *Another Kind of Home* (Scottish Office, 1992, p.5-6). Articles were evaluated in terms of positive, negative or factual tone. A positive article was defined as one that congratulates or praises; drew reader attention to a previously overlooked topic; or used neutral language where a very negative point of view could otherwise arise. A negative article was defined as one which selected a negative topic to begin with; criticized or took a negative stance on the topic; used emotive or negative language; or attempted to persuade the reader to share a negative viewpoint. A factual article was defined as one using particularly neutral language, simply describing dates, figures or an event without apparently taking a stance either positively or negatively. It should be emphasised that the designation of an article as positive, negative or factual was largely subjective; this is in line with other studies (e.g., Franklin, 1998).

Findings

The articles surveyed fell into five broad categories. The findings under each of the categories are reported as follows:

1. Child abuse and neglect

There were 77 articles collected on child abuse during the six months. There was a high quantity of negative articles (some 75%) on child abuse. A few articles, however, did raise reader awareness of the plight of young people (particularly boys and young men) who were forced into prostitution. Some went on to criticise authorities on the grounds that not enough was being done to help youngsters and some mentioned that many of the young people involved had run away from residential care. Other negative articles concerned accusations of historic abuse.

Some of the negative articles also contained positive points about residential child care. For example, some criticised local authorities for not having intervened in certain cases, and stated that the young people in question should have been taken into residential care rather than being left in potentially harmful situations.

2. Absconding

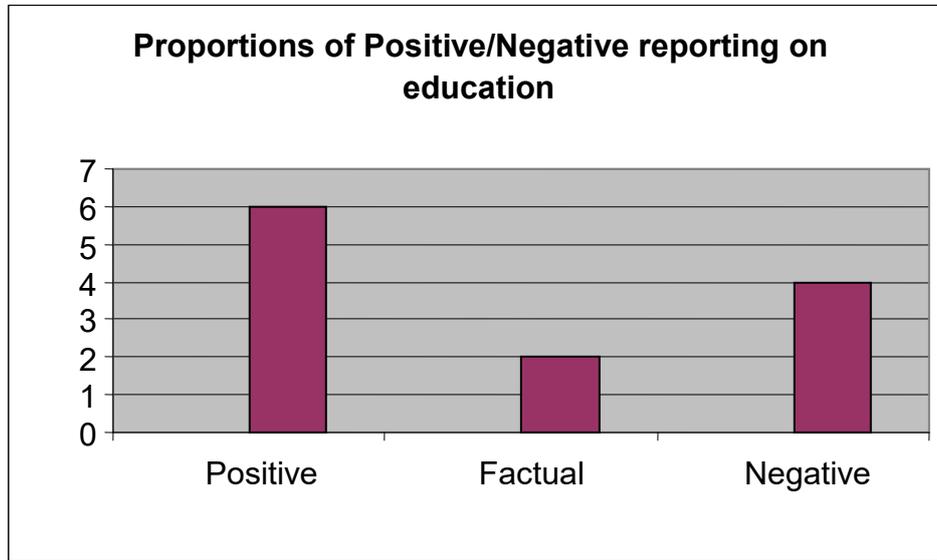
Six of the articles concerned young people who had run away from care. Of the six articles on absconding collected during the six-month period, four covered young people who had absconded from residential units and the difficulties they encountered. The articles did not usually go into the reasons for absconding.

3. Education

12 articles concerning the education of children in residential care were collected during the survey period. The main issue was the Scottish Parliament's intention to ensure that children in residential care should attain a better standard of education, and to provide funding for this. There were reports also on a new scheme that would

allow children in residential care to take places at boarding schools. Figure One shows the proportion of positive to negative reporting on the subject of education.

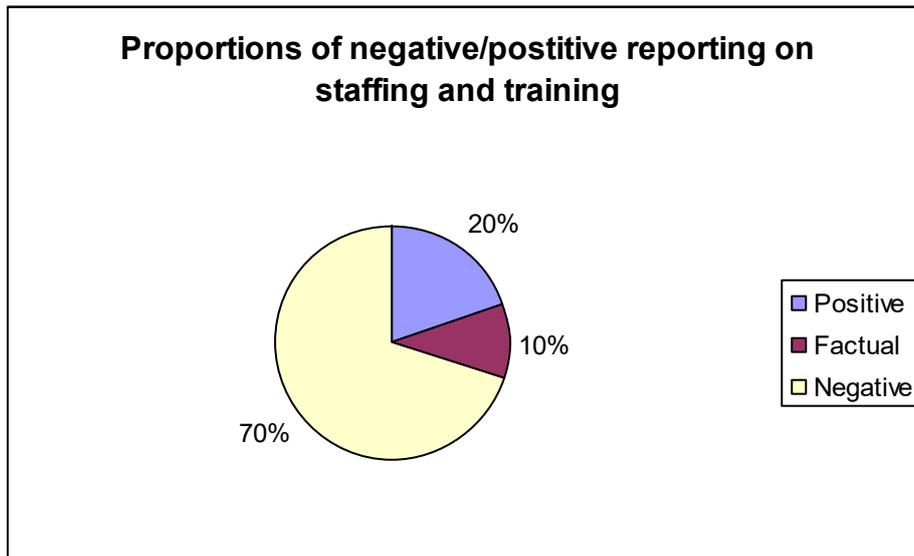
Figure One: types of reporting on education



4. Staffing and Training

There were ten articles on staffing and training collected during the six months. Staffing and training issues were covered by a number of papers over the survey period. Of these papers, 40% were broadsheets, 30% were local papers and 30% were tabloid press (including the *Sunday Mail*). Most of the articles concerned the inappropriate behaviour of care staff or social workers.

Figure Two: types of reporting on staff training



5. Legal and policy issues

There was a total of 49 articles collected in the legal and policy issues category during the survey period. This category covered aspects of the law such as the use of child witnesses in court, and also discussions and commentary on current government policy.

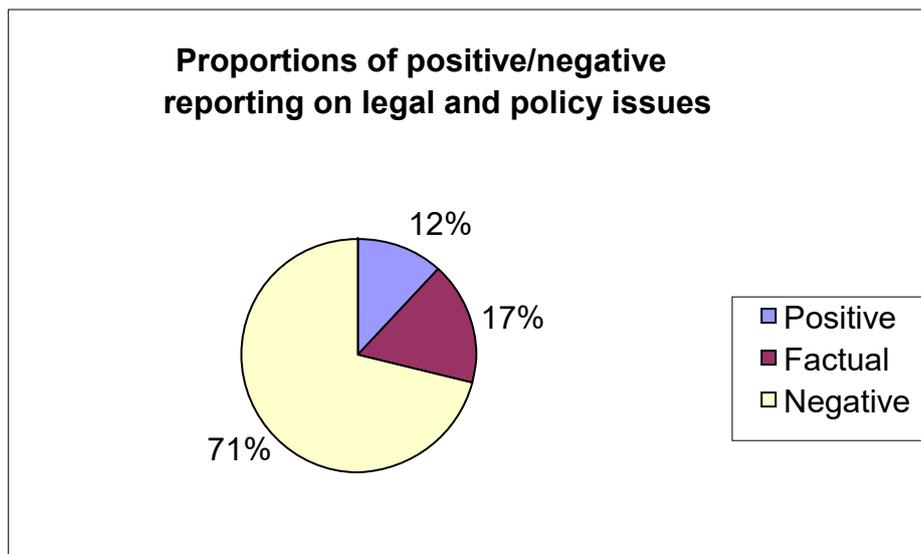
Figure Three: Percentages of topics on legal and policy issues covered by the online press during the survey period

Topic	Percentage
Former unit residents in trouble	4
Social workers/child protection issues in court	8
Commentary on existing government policy	35
'Trawling' for abuse in care/false accusations of care staff	4

Court cases involving care staff	18
Investigations involving care staff (non-abuse related)	2
Whistleblowing	2
Young offenders	10
Children's commissioner	4
Projects – young people & crime	6
Children/young people in court & child witnesses	6

The online press appeared to concentrate on discussing existing policy with regards to residential child care and related issues. Most reports collected during the survey period were negative in tone, outlining shortcomings and illustrating how not enough is being done by government or agencies.

Figure Four: Types of reporting on legal and policy issues



Negative reporting tends to outweigh factual or positive reporting in most categories. The press was, however, particularly favourable towards schemes to improve the education of young people in care.

Most of the reporting on child abuse and neglect was negative. However, the reporting was justified given the nature of child abuse. Also the negativity was directed toward the act of abusing children and in many cases not directed against residential child care *per se*.

Local press had a strong inclination to report negatively on children's units in their area, often calling for 'hell homes' to be closed. The local and tabloid press most frequently reported on staffing and training issues and were particularly focused on social work staff behaving in an 'inappropriate manner'. Legal and policy issues were mostly covered by the broadsheet press and often involved criticism of inadequacies in existing policy and practice regarding young people.

In highlighting some of these problems, however, the press can be drawing public awareness to serious issues. In one example, a report by the *Daily Record* criticises a 'lack of communication between children's services' and says that they have 'left vulnerable kids 'virtually invisible' to care workers.' The tone is negative at first, with the sensational headline of *The Invisible Kids Scandal*, but the report mostly consists of quotations from Jack McConnell and other MSPs. However, at the end of the mostly factual and relatively non-opinionated report it ends with a slightly sensationalised section of 'the report's findings' (*Daily Record*, 31/10/2001).

This brief analysis will now be supplemented by two case examples illustrating some of the more problematical issues which can be raised in press reporting.

Case examples

Two case examples were selected from the survey. They were selected to illustrate how extreme press coverage can be on occasion, and the problems this can create for young people, staff, and managers.

Taxpayers' money squandered: The Concert Trip

The first case looks at a group of young women from a local authority children's home in Dundee, who used part of their holiday entitlement to attend a concert in Rotterdam given by Robbie Williams. The young women arranged tickets, accommodation and transport themselves: accompanied by their keyworkers, using buses and the Hull-Rotterdam overnight ferry, they had one night in a three-star hotel, and a standing ticket for the concert itself. The total cost per person was under £200. According to contacts at Who Cares? Scotland, everybody had a lovely time and there was no trouble ... until they got home.

Anger over Robbie Reward, proclaimed the local evening paper, three days after they got back: *Girls who Misbehaved Go Abroad!* Journalist Bruce Robbins of the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* (20/3/2001) reported that 'A council social worker, who asked not to be named for fear of facing the sack' had informed him of this 'squandering' of public money to placate troublesome children. It was 'a reward for bad behaviour', he told Robbins. 'The ones who cause the trouble went on the trip.' 'If you want the treats, you have to make life difficult for social workers.' The journalist then quoted 'a council spokesman', who 'confirmed the details but refused to answer any further questions'. Mr. Robbins also quoted the 'social work spokesman for the Council's Conservative group'. The councillor told him that home helps for the elderly in his ward should be a priority.

Mr. Robbins' sources did not tell him that Dundee, in common with all other Scottish councils in line with Scottish Executive guidance, (Scottish Office, 1997, p. 80-1) has a budget to give all its looked-after young people holidays, and that the young women were acting within their rights. The young women themselves, however, refused to accept this treatment. One of them contacted the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* to ask for a correction. She 'said she was "very unhappy" about the publicity', and told Mr. Robbins that she had been in care since she was a baby. Neither the circumstances of her being looked after nor those surrounding the trip itself were connected with bad behaviour. 'It is understood the three teenagers were not in the unit because of previous bad behaviour, but had been taken into care for other reasons,' Mr. Robbins admitted. He further accepted that children's units have a budget which includes a holiday allowance for young people.

These admissions came close to a full retraction and apology, but Mr. Robbins also went back to his 'source within the social work department', who remained 'adamant' that this was 'rewarding kids who misbehave'. 'Cash and perks went to children who exhibited the worst behaviour', he claimed. No specific examples of misbehaviour on the part of the three young women were advanced. *Girls Deny Trip Connected to Bad Behaviour*, acknowledged the headline (*Dundee Evening Telegraph*, 21/3/2001).

Between the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* first running the story and then publishing its retraction, a journalist on the *Scottish Daily Mail* had picked it up and printed it on the front page. *Scandal of Free Pop Trip for Teen Bad Girls*, reported Graham Grant (*Scottish Daily Mail*, 21/3/2001); *Taxpayers' Cash For Robbie Concert Jaunt!* While the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* was backtracking and admitting that the young women were not being looked after because of behavioural

problems, the *Daily Mail* was denouncing them as ‘teenage troublemakers’, and, in a new twist to the story, placed them in a ‘council-run secure unit’. In a leader comment which angrily denounced the whole of Dundee Social Work Department, the *Mail* stated that the three girls ‘were selected ... specifically because they had behaved badly and were regarded as troublemakers’, while at the same time the *Evening Telegraph* was admitting that the young women ‘were not in the unit because of previous bad behaviour’. The statement about a secure unit was a simple error of fact.

When contacted, Graham Grant of the *Scottish Daily Mail* told us that he had not been aware that the *Dundee Evening Telegraph* had retracted the story. He said that the *Daily Mail* had not been contacted by the young people, and that his paper had not published a correction, and would not have done unless they had been asked to do so.

A few months later, Who Cares? Scotland reported the story in their *Speak out!* magazine. Under the title *Robbie’s Angels*, Who Cares? described how the young women had to face the press ‘Not because they had done anything wrong but because they’re in care.’ They pointed out the grudging nature of the retraction and complained about the intrusion of privacy and the stigmatisation of young people in the care system. Also, they noted, the press had failed to comment on positive aspects of the trip: ‘The papers failed to report that the trip was trouble free or that staff had given up free time to go along with the young people.’ The article congratulated the unit staff and social work department for supporting the young women, and ‘a special well done to the Angels for not sitting back and accepting what the papers said, but responding in a responsible and mature manner.’ (Who Cares? Scotland, 2001)

Not in my Back Yard: Homes from Hell

The second case looks at how issues surrounding three established children's homes and one as yet unbuilt were examined in four Scottish local newspapers. The homes were at Hallglen in Stirlingshire, Ferniehill in Edinburgh and Leslie Street in Motherwell; the stories were covered in the *Falkirk Herald* (15/6/01), the *Edinburgh Evening News* (3/7/01 and 5/10/01) and the *Hamilton Advertiser* (27/7/01) respectively. A proposed development in Cambuslang, which would have incorporated a new home, was reported in the *Rutherglen Reformer* (15/2/01).

These articles had one thing in common: the strength of feeling in local communities when children's home residents were alleged to have caused trouble in the surrounding area.

The language used in the headlines left no doubt about the sentiments: *Fury At Plan To Reopen The 'Hell Home'*; *Protesters Fight To Shut 'Hell Home'* (*Edinburgh Evening News*); *Shut Kids' Home, Say Fed-Up Neighbours* (*Hamilton Advertiser*). The opening sentences in the reports about Hallglen and Ferniehill used particularly emotive language: 'misery', 'intimidated', 'blame', and 'demanding' (*Falkirk Herald*), and 'ticking timebomb', (three times), 'showdown' and 'confrontation' (*Edinburgh Evening News*). This contrasted with the report in the *Hamilton Advertiser*. The feelings were just as strong, but apart from residents 'demanding' the closure of the home, the language was more restrained. The problems reported in the various sources were largely similar: bad language, vandalism, abuse of alcohol and drugs, sexual activity in public places, abuse of local residents, playing loud music and throwing missiles. The police were mentioned only once, having been asked to help curb anti-social behaviour around the Motherwell home.

All the reports mentioned communication with Social Work managers and/or councillors, and three of the descriptions were of interest. Particularly striking was the report in the *Falkirk Herald*. The opening paragraph had the strongest language of any of the reports; by contrast, the closing paragraph described the joint statement of the Social Work Department and the residents in conciliatory terms: ‘understanding’, ‘acceptable’, ‘consultation’, ‘solutions’ and ‘community’. The first report on Ferniehill, which appeared in the *Edinburgh Evening News* on 3/7/01, described the sympathetic response of two of the Council members involved, but concluded the article with negative comments from the Social Work Department when asked about the nature of the children in the unit and the cost of refurbishment: ‘We’re not going to be answering any of your questions’. Some progress appeared to have been made by the time of the second article. The Social Work Convener aimed to ‘establish proper channels of communication with residents and try to sort out any problems’. The articles started with sensational language, then the narrative settled down to a much more dispassionate description of all points of view involved.

Both articles in the *Edinburgh Evening News* mentioned that some of them were ‘from troubled backgrounds or have previously been in trouble with the police.’ Only the *Hamilton Advertiser* mentioned that ‘family breakdown and related difficulties’ were reasons for their situation. In the same article, there was some evidence of the community’s sympathy for the children: ‘you feel that these children have got to go somewhere, and it would be unfair if no-one wanted them in their area’. The *Falkirk Herald* quoted one of the local residents who said that she and her neighbours had all tried to be fair to the children and make friends with them, but the children’s ‘irrational’ behaviour had made that difficult. There was some attempt to show both sides of the argument here. Only in the *Falkirk Herald* was any blame attached to the

staff; one quote stated that those responsible for the children were ‘out of their depth’ and added that ‘there is no discipline because there’s no adequate supervision’. On the subject of the accommodation, some of the articles mentioned the fact that these were small units, but only the *Hamilton Advertiser* put this in context by emphasising that it was part of the Council’s Residential Child Care Action Plan to create small-scale units to replace more traditional large homes.

A different set of circumstances was reported in the *Rutherglen Reformer*. Without recourse to strong language, the article conveyed the apprehension felt by members of Cambuslang Golf Club about plans to build flats, houses, and a unit housing six to eight children on a derelict site. Their main concern, reported rather sceptically, was ‘the risk of people being struck by golf balls’, but the report went on to say that ‘members also fear more vandalism and predict security problems’. A spokesman for the club said that there were already security problems on ladies’ nights, and that male members were patrolling at these times. For this reason, he said, the children’s home would not be a good idea, although he added that ‘they do say that the type of children who will be going there are not the type who would create any hassle’. South Lanarkshire Council were unconvinced by the club’s objections, and stated that ‘anti-social behaviour is a matter for the police’, a point which seems to have been overlooked by Cambuslang Golf Club, and by almost all the other parties involved in the incidents described above.

Conclusion

There is no doubt that press reporting of residential child care in all its complexity presents problems. The press condemns ‘homes from hell’ where ‘under-stimulated’ children allegedly cause havoc locally, while at the same time blaming young people

for wasting taxpayers' money when they show the initiative to organise a trip for themselves. We have seen that in cases where most of the press are neutral and factual in their reporting, one paper may break ranks and print a sensationalist headline. This is not restricted to the tabloids; broadsheet treatment of the same incident can present contrasting attitudes. This type of reporting can create a skewed image of children in care. There is no doubt that children and young people who are looked after in residential accommodation feel themselves that they are stigmatised by the press. (Who Cares? Scotland, 2001)

Some positive messages do emerge from this survey. One is that if the press are challenged over unfair reporting, they will sometimes apologise. We have seen an example of young people challenging unfair reporting and forcing a retraction.

Another point is that not all press reporting is uniformly negative. The local papers report examples of NIMBY (Not in my Back Yard) Syndrome, but not all of them use equally negative language, and there are examples of reporting which are more balanced and sympathetic. Some of the examples show factual and non-emotive reporting, and even a degree of scepticism about local fears (e.g., concern over misdirected golf balls). In many cases an attention-grabbing headline is followed by a story which turns out to be more objective. Both tabloid and broadsheet papers will use eye-catching language to draw attention to a story, but this often turns out to be much less sensational than has been promised by the headline.

The Library and Information Service of the Scottish Institute for Residential Child Care will continue to monitor the press for reporting relevant to residential child care. We are hopeful that this will provide a fruitful resource for future research. The picture which emerges from these tentative findings is rather more complex than

simply a blanket hostility to residential child care and to the young people that it exists to serve.

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