

Toronto's First Street Kids and the Origins of Child Welfare Systems in Canada Part 2: Later years

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Abstract

This study focuses on the evolution of a philanthropic movement in the second half of 19th Century Canada that gave particular attention to a population of children and youth in Toronto known as newsboys and newsgirls. The plight of these children, who were largely living on the streets although in many instances still connected in varying degrees to their families, attracted growing attention in Toronto as the city emerged as a major commercial and industrial hub in Canada in the closing decades of the century. Mounting public concern about these wayward young people was fueled by alarmist (though sometimes sympathetic) newspaper accounts of an expanding population of children and youth who were plying their trade from a very young age on the streets selling newspapers, shoelaces, pencils and later working as what were called bootblacks. In establishment circles, these children and youth came to be viewed as a threat to public order whose rough apprenticeship on the streets, so it was speculated, left them vulnerable to a life of crime and prostitution later in life. However, in time, the attention that this population garnered did help usher in a new era that began giving recognition to some fundamental rights of all children. From this, we witness the begrudging acceptance in those early days of a more activist role that government might play in the development of policies that allowed for greater state intervention in protecting vulnerable and marginalised children and youth.

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John Joseph Kelso, recognised as the founder of the Child Welfare System, in Ontario, was born in Ireland on March 31, 1864. He came to Canada in 1874 at the age of 10 with his family who struggled to adapt to life in their new country. He worked as a crime reporter for the World and then the Globe (May, 1887 until July, 1893) focusing on the downtown core of the city writing reports from the slums and child prostitution that saw small girls selling themselves on Yonge Street and then turning earnings over to parents who oftentimes were alcoholics (Bagnell, 1980). From this experience, he was exposed to boys and girls in street trades as bootblacks, newspaper vendors, peddling shoelaces, pencils. In many cases, these children were oftentimes the sole support for families in times of illness and frequent unemployment (McCullough, 2002). This would place Kelso in a rather delicate and awkward position as an employee of newspapers that depended on the newsboys to distribute their product. (McCullough, 2002). The public perception was that these hordes of young people were rootless, out of control and prone to criminal activity and likely candidates in adulthood as a drain on public resources. Recalling later the epiphany he experienced one cold night on the way home from work, Kelso recounted the experience that changed the course of his life:

On a cold November evening in 1887, two ragged children, a brother and sister, were huddled in the shadows of a doorway on Toronto's Yonge Street, pleading for loose change from passers-by. Shortly after 11.00 pm, a young reporter stumbled across the two pitiful waifs. The youngsters told him they would be beaten by their drunken father if they returned home empty-handed. The sympathetic reporter took the children under his wing and set off across the city in search of an orphan's home where they could spend the night in warmth and safety. Much to the good Samaritan's surprise and despair, none of the institutions he approached would rescue the youngsters from the street. Sometime after midnight, exhausted and despondent, the reporter found the children a tiny room in a cheap men's lodging. The following day, he recounted his nocturnal adventure for the benefit of his readers and beseeched civic authorities to open a children's temporary shelter for emergency cases like the one he encountered (Kelso Papers, ND).

Interestingly, when the case reached the magistrate, he dismissed it on the grounds that the parents could do as they liked with their children (Morrison, 1971). However, Kelso was not to be deterred so at the early age of 22 in 1887 he founded the Toronto Humane Society as a voluntary organisation committed to the protection of women, children and animals. Its purposes were clearly laid out in an address to the Canadian Institute on February 19, 1887:

To stop cruelty to children; to rescue them from vicious influences and remedy their condition; the beating of animals, overloading street cars, overloading wagons, working old horses, driving galled and disabled animals; to introduce drinking fountains, better laws, better methods of horseshoeing, humane literature into schools and homes; to introduce children to be humane; everybody to practice and teach kindness to animals and others (Kelso, 1911).

Like so many of Kelso's innovations, this initiative was inspired by developments south of the border and as Jones and Rutman have noted 'his contribution was not as an original thinker on social issues but rather as a popularizer and promoter within Ontario of policies and programmes already developed elsewhere' (Jones and Rutman, 1981). Throughout his career, Kelso regularly attended conferences in the U. S. that focused on social reform. Very quickly, he realized that the wellbeing of children and animals was different and noted that 'keeping the animals and children from clashing, the two having their separate and distinct friends' must lead to a parting of the ways resulting in the formation of a separate organization focusing exclusively on children and named the Children's Aid Society on July 21, 1891 (Jones and Rutman, 1981). This new association was modelled on the Children's Aid Society established in New York City in 1854. It wasn't long before Kelso would focus his attention specifically on the plight of newsboys and newsgirls when he launched his campaign to regulate by public ordinance of street trading by children. As he reflected later:

...it was estimated that between six and seven hundred boys and about one hundred girls were sent out on the streets by drunken and avaricious parents to earn money by the precarious selling of newspapers, pencils, etc., more frequently using this occupation as a cloak for begging and pilfering. He also noted that I had no sooner entered on a journalistic career that the neglected condition of a large class of the children of the poor, and the absence of organized effort on their behalf, impressed me so forcibly that I was unable to resist the appeal to become their friend and advocate (Kelso, 1893).

Although young girls were also found working on the streets, little reference is available about their plight. However, we can gather from Kelso's later recollections that their condition was a bleak one:

Investigations at that time also revealed indescribably shocking moral conditions among the little girls who thronged the

newspaper alleys and sold papers in the neighbourhood of saloons, theatres and downtown thoroughfares until late in the night. Everyone deplored these things, but no one seemed to know exactly what should be done. And so the message came, written in the skies: 'Give up ambition, turn aside from cherished hopes, and plead for these little ones who perish by the wayside, in a land abounding in Christian activities'. (Kelso, 1911)

The intrepid Kelso then found time, as noted in the May 21 issue of *The News* to announce the establishment of a 'FRESH AIR FUND to Give Excursions and Happiness to the Little Poor Ones'. The first excursion was to Lorne Park on June 27, 1888 and described as follows:

About four hundred children being collected in St. John's Ward by Miss Howe and other mission workers. The procession down Yonge Street to the boat attracted much public attention. It was headed by the fife and drum band of the Boys' Home and two well-known philanthropists, W. H. Howland and William Gooderham. Other excursions followed, until two thousand five hundred of the city's poorest children had been given a day's outing. In the five years following over thirty thousand happy children participated in its benefits (Kelso, 1894).

Kelso went on to recall that 'during these years a Christmas entertainment for poor children was also carried on, and about fifteen thousand Santa Claus gifts were sent to children, with the co-operation of city mission workers. Christmas dinners to large masses of children are not now so necessary or desirable'. Kelso was one of the first to draw attention to the conditions under which these children and youth were forced on to the streets but also was quick to attribute their plight to moral lassitude on the part of negligent parents:

Standards of life among the working classes were extremely low. Many families lived in unsanitary hovels fronting on lanes and alleys without toilet facilities. Wages are scandalously low, both

men and women sought to drown their troubles in drinking saloons and drinking places were to be found on nearly every corner. Education was not compulsory and thousands of children rarely entered a school. During the winter building trades were entirely suspended throwing a large force of men into idleness. To keep the family in food and the parents in drink, many children, girls as well as boys were sent on the street to sell newspapers and peddle laces and pencils and other trifles—a form of begging in disguise. Immorality among these children was exceedingly common and apart from a few church missions very little was done of a constructive character (Kelso, 1894).

It became evident very early on in his new calling, why newsboys and newsgirls drew his particular attention. They were hard to miss. An 1887 survey, estimated that 700 youth were engaged in street trades at that time with approximately 100 girls included in that figure:

Some of the boys live at home, but the majority are wanderers on the streets, selling papers generally and sometimes forced to beg. In the summertime they can live out all night, but in the winter they are obliged to patronize the cheap lodging houses, the Newsboys' Home or St. Nicholas Home. The course of life they pursue leads to miserable results as when a newsboy gets to be seventeen years of age he finds that his avocation is at an end, it does not produce money enough and he has acquired lazy, listless, habits which totally unfit him for any kind of work. He becomes a vagrant and perhaps worse a wanderer all over the country (Kelso, ND).

Railing against the condition of Toronto slums, Kelso went on to add the following:

Bad housing conditions inevitably tend to drunkenness in parents; to delinquency in children; to disorderly conduct; to wife and family desertion by men who get tired of it all; to immorality in the growing generation owing to the lack of privacy and the

consequent lack of modesty; to the spread of typhoid fever, diphtheria, scarlet fever, and the ravages of the great white plague (Kelso, 1910).

He goes on to observe: 'we build orphanages, shelters, reformatories and hospitals, and delight to do the rescue work imposed upon us, but how little thought is given to the causes and conditions that create so large a demand for philanthropy and charity'. Despite his progressive views by the standards of his day, Kelso still embodied the ideas and strong class bias of a late Victorian gentleman as illustrated in this article that he wrote for the 1894 issue of *The Canadian Magazine* entitled 'Neglected and Friendless Children':

Consider the case of a child born of drunken and degraded parents, growing up in a hot-bed of vice; hearing nothing but profanity and obscenity; learning nothing of the difference between right and wrong; no prayer whispered over its cradle; no pure thoughts of a better life instilled into its budding mind; its playground the street; its companions equally benighted with itself. It cannot attend school; it has no clothes; it is not kept clean; the mother would not take the trouble to send it, and school boards are not always sufficiently interested to provide accommodation and enforce attendance. Growing up untrained, except in evil and sharp cunning ways, the child at seven or eight years of age is sent out to sell papers or to beg, sometimes to steal, on the streets constantly, and with companions older in vice than himself. The boy learns rapidly, until at fifteen or sixteen he becomes a thief when opportunity offers, and trusts to luck to escape detection and retain freedom (Kelso, 1894, 213-216).

Again reflecting the class bias that would dominate social reform efforts well into the 20th Century, Kelso's recommendation was 'simple instruction and more manual training in the schools provided for the poorer classes of children' (Kelso, 1910).

To help move matters along, on June 19, 1889 the draft of a proposed by-law to regulate children engaged in selling newspapers and as bootblacks was submitted to City Council by the Toronto Humane Society. The matter was deferred until a delegation could be present to speak to the proposal. This occurred on October 15, 1889 when a deputation of the Humane Society composed of leading city figures including J. J. Kelso argued before the Board for passage of a by-law to license newsboys and bootblacks. The Globe presented an account of the proceedings in the October 16, 1889 issue of the paper:

The views of the deputation were voiced by Mr. Kelso. He stated that some two years ago he became interested in the subject through hearing police officials complain of the large number of children being ruined through the evil example of the streets. There was no law on the subject, and he waited on the Legislation Committee of the City Council, and through their instrumentality secured the insertion of a clause in the Revised Statutes directing Police Commissioners of cities to regulate and control children engaged as vendors of newspapers and smallwares, or as bootblacks. In accordance with this legislation a by law was drawn up which they now asked the Commissioners to adopt. Mr. Kelso gave a number of strong arguments in favor of the measure, and pointed out that he was unable to find any city in the United States where girls were allowed to sell papers on the streets (The Globe, 1889).

After hearing the views of the deputation, it was decided to send the draft by-law to the City Solicitor for review and revision. However, when the major newspapers got wind of what Kelso was bringing forward, they released their fury on the crusading young activist because, without the newsboys and girls, the papers would be hard-pressed to distribute their newspapers. The most vicious attacks came from his former employer, The World who dubbed him The Tagger because of his suggestion that all newsboys wear badges to distinguish them. In cartoons, he was depicted as a dog catcher trying to capture elusive

newsboys with a large net (Jones and Rutman, 1981). The most blatant attack came in *The World* on 18 April 1890:

Kelso The Tagger

His law to Tag Newsboys

Why Shouldn't Reporters be Tagged

Humanitarians Run Mad

Mr. Fresh Blush Kelso, a young Irishman, blew into Toronto one day and set up as a reporter. Then he felt called upon to become a humanitarian, a guardian of children and a regulator of the people. He is self-constituted inspector-general of cruelty to: horses' tails, street cars (bob-tails), shoe-blacks, newsboys, sparrows and dickey birds and a sort of humanitarian pooh-bah. He is still engaged in this lawful undertaking. He has a fondness for spouting from platforms, of having a lot of old ladies dancing about him, and still fonder of his good looks. *The Globe* was made the organ of the humanitarians, and Fresh Blush lately got it into his head that it was time he undertook the regulation issued by the police commissioners that hereafter the newsboys and newsgirls be tagged like dogs, that if caught without the tag they be sent to jail, and that the entire police force of the city be turned into a contrivance for catching all the untagged newsvendors found in the streets. Does Fresh Blush think if the children are driven off the streets they won't be engaged in something more discreditable than selling papers? Isn't his legislation, if it is effective, the best possible way for worthless parents to unload their children on the city? Oh, send out the brat to sell papers, the police will arrest him, send him to the Industrial School or somewhere else, and we will be rid of him. Doesn't Fresh Blush think the police have got enough to do without chasing the newsboys? Why shouldn't reporters with good looks and smooth manners be tagged and something else as well as newsboys? Put a tag on Kelso and how he'd like it.

This was followed in the next day's issue with the following little ditty:

This is the town where everybody must be tagged.

The dogs are tagged.

The letter carriers are tagged.

The waterworks inspectors are tagged.

The streetcar conductors and drivers are tagged.

The firemen have tags.

And now Tagger Kelso wants to put tags

On the newsboys and cab drivers, the medical students

And bank clerks

The tagger is thinking of a law to tag school

Children.

Tag! Tag! Tag!

The Evening Telegram joined the chorus of opposition to the new bylaw:

The Juvenile population of Toronto can still breathe. This assertion is openly made conscientiously believing the same to be true. The Police Commissioners have not yet passed a by-law to regulate the supply of air and sunshine to the boys of Toronto, but they may do so any day. A board that will pass such an obnoxious, senseless, absurd, degrading and uncalled for set of resolutions...is capable of meddling in almost anything. (Bain, 1955)

In 1889, despite vociferous newspaper opposition, Kelso and his supporters were successful in having the Toronto Police Commission enact a bylaw that required street vendors under the age of sixteen to be licensed by the police. Boys under the age of eight and girls of any age were barred from street vending. Children who violated these conditions could be fined, sent to jail or despatched to an industrial school. These industrial schools had been established in the mid-1880s and were the forerunners of Ontario's young offender institutions. 'Wayward and foolish girls' were, in many instances, distributed among the various institutions in the city: the Frances Willard Home, the Fred Victor Door of Hope Home, the Salvation Army Rescue Home, Bellamy Home, the Industrial Home (Archibald, 1907) Employers could also be fined heavily for violations of the bylaw. (McCullough, 2002) The bylaw was passed by City Council in October, 1889 but not enforced until July, 1890 in order to give the newsboys time to get themselves licensed. The bylaw was to be administered by the Morality Department of the Police Force under Inspector Archibald.

As Kelso's crusades mounted, his thinking on how to deal with destitute children began to take shape recognising that the state did, indeed, have a duty to protect vulnerable children; that a home environment was to be preferred over an institutional one; that the state needed to be more involved in regulating social behaviour and that a more systematic and professional approach to the administration of welfare services was called for (Speisman, 1973). Kelso was part of a growing number of people who, in the latter part of the 1880s and throughout the 1890s reflected a changing attitude to children in need of protection (Sutherland, 1978). Continuing with his focus on newsboys, Kelso reported in 1890 that 'no less than 592 boys' had been licensed to sell papers in the streets of Toronto and a couple hundred unlicensed. At least 200 boys among the licensed 'had no responsible guardians or parents' (Bullen, 1989). By 1891, Kelso was able to work his way on to the board of the Newsboys' Home

where he was able to advocate for two important changes: first, that the work should be removed from the somewhat dilapidated building and poor surroundings of Frederick Street to a more helpful and inspiring neighbourhood; and second, that the boys should be encouraged to learn trades and give up the 'precarious existence of newspaper selling'. (Kelso, ND) The facility was moved to the corner of Gould and Church Streets where it remained until well into the 20th Century and was re-branded the Working Boys' Home at Kelso's urging. It should be pointed out that the home had always been intended to prepare street youth for more stable occupations once their short careers as newsboys and bootblack drew to a close. The membership of Kelso on the Board simply reinforced this goal. By 1891, Kelso was instrumental in establishing the Toronto Children's Aid Society. The Society was formed on July 3, 1891 and received its charter on October 12, 1893. The first Annual Report was dated January 9, 1894 and by that time 5 CASs had been established in Ontario. Despite opposition by Kelso, sectarian mistrust still held sway at the end of the century as reflected in the quick establishment of a parallel CAS with the organisation of the Catholic Children's Aid Society of St. Vincent de Paul on October 8, 1894 followed by an Order-in-Council on February 14, 1895 that provided legal status to this parallel CAS (Bain, 1955). To this day, we have 2 parallel organisations operating along sectarian lines in Toronto.

The continuing attention that Kelso was giving the plight of the newsboys pointed out how this very conspicuous segment of the urban population served as a catalyst for bringing about policy change on the part of the Government of Ontario. In 1889, the provincial government established a Royal Commission on the Prison and Reformatory System of Ontario. Kelso was invited to address the Commission and was able to use its deliberations as a platform to promote his proposals for reform as noted by Jones and Rutman (1981):

He began his account with a description of the campaign to license newsboys. The system of young boys selling newspapers he described as 'pernicious right through'. There is no system of dealing with those engaged in it so as to bring out their moral

nature.' He dwelt at length on the moral decadence of the newsboys and newsgirls, and the high proportion of boys who became criminals and girls who entered prostitution. Existing measures to reform these children he considered totally ineffective. The Newsboys' Home, despite 'its nice clean beds' and 'texts on the wall or over the bed, and appropriate mottoes', could not attract the newsboys, who objected to the regulation of their behaviour in the home and preferred life in the 'low dives'. There is no training these boys to habits of industry. They will neglect their work, run away, and throw themselves out of a situation without the slightest regard of what is to become of them. My ideas are that we ought to endeavour to do away with this system altogether, to stop entirely a large number of these boys from pursuing this occupation (p. 49).

Following enactment of the new child protection legislation in 1893, Kelso was appointed as Superintendent, a position he held until his retirement in July, 1934. From 1900 until 1915, he also served as Provincial Inspector of Juvenile Immigration and for 30 years was Inspector of Industrial Schools. His reach in early years extended to Manitoba, British Columbia, Nova Scotia, Saskatchewan, Quebec and New Brunswick as those provinces followed suit in enacting child protection legislation. In 1893, he started agitation for a mother's allowance scheme, workers' compensation and old age pensions. In 1908, he played an important role in establishing the Toronto Playgrounds Association. He also worked with officials of the University of Toronto to establish the University Settlement House in 1910 and in 1914, the University of Toronto instituted a full year training programme for working with children that evolved into the School of Social Work at the university - the first training program of its kind in Canada.

In 1893, Kelso published a tract describing the rationale for establishment of a children's court in Toronto: 'It is founded on the assumption that children are not inherently bad, that their delinquencies are usually due to causes for which they are not responsible, and that by right methods these causes can be reached and

removed, and the child encouraged and assisted to develop character under healthy, normal conditions'. In Kelso's view, the court should be an educational rather than a police tribunal. It would be conducted by specially selected individuals and would hold session in premises removed from the regular courts like schools or with the children's aid society. The court was approved by the Ontario Legislature followed by a supplementary Act of the Federal Parliament in 1894. However, this particular piece of legislation was never enacted.

Throughout the course of this narrative, certain key themes emerge that help explain the background to actions taken to protect vulnerable children in the second half of the 19th Century and have persisted in varying degrees up to the present day. One feature is the complete lack of voice for dependent children that has only been challenged in recent times; the demonisation of parents and the arbitrary distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor and including attempts to impose middle class values on a lower working class population constantly left vulnerable to poverty and unemployment. Added to this is continuing government ambivalence about levels of support and commitment of resources to be provided for services to marginalised populations and the ongoing preoccupation with the cost effectiveness of such services. An emphasis on the redemptive power of labour and instilling a work ethic that had moralistic overtones continued to be reinforced by sectarian divisions; a preoccupation with crime reduction and prevention persisted as well with a tendency to want to punish those who had offended. In those early days, there was a total lack of consideration given to allowing and promoting opportunities for social mobility in what constituted a very class driven society at the time. Residues of this way of thinking are still with us all these years later and can be discerned in the way we think about the provision of services for vulnerable and dependent populations and who gets to determine what those services will look like and how much of the public purse should be directed to and expended on these services.

Because of their resilience and entrepreneurial spirit, newsboys remained a strong presence on the streets of Toronto until well into the 20th Century. There

were six newspapers to be served after the turn of the century and home delivery had not yet become available. In fact, in 1908 following a strike the newsboys formed into a union and by 1910, 600 boys continued to ply their trade on the streets of Toronto—a number that hadn't changed much from the time when Kelso led his crusade to rid the streets of Toronto of earlier generations of street kids. Over time, many of these young people demonstrated their resilience by acquiring the rudiments of some schooling and would go on to contribute to the commercial life of their bustling metropolis. Unfortunately, the fate of the hundred or so newsgirls, banned from selling newspapers with the 1890 bylaw is shrouded in mystery. Their full story remains to be told. All these years later, by examining the plight of newsboys and newsgirls, we gain an appreciation and understanding of how the large migration of a desperate and alienated population in the late 1840s gave rise to a unique street culture and population that helped shape the culturally diverse character of Toronto; accelerate the drive to protect children at risk and pave the way, at the same time, for subsequent waves of immigrants who would add their contribution. This would happen despite their own experiences with adversity, resulting in Toronto becoming the most multicultural city in the world and Canada being recognized as a largely welcoming haven for immigrants and refugees. It didn't come easily for successive waves of immigrants and refugees. That we have come to view ourselves as a welcoming refuge for displaced peoples hasn't always been the case, and even to this day, does not necessarily enjoy universal support within our borders. Throughout the 20th Century, attitudes towards children would continue to become more benevolent; incidence of corporal punishment would decline although still allowed in our Criminal Code; health care and growing attention to public health, recreation, hygiene and disease control would improve and lifespans increase dramatically with household incomes for many becoming more secure. However, passage of the 1989 Convention on the Rights of the Child reminds us that the work of protecting children at risk remains unfinished.

About the author

Dr Dunlop began his career as a child and youth care worker in 1970. He held academic posts in Canada and New Zealand, retiring from his position with the School of Child & Youth Care at Ryerson University in Toronto in 2016. He continues to teach the online course in Management and Policy Development in the new MA program in child and youth care at Ryerson.

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