

A TRUST BETRAYED

The names of Leoni Keating, Heidi Kosida, Charlene Salt and Jasmine Beckford have been etched on the public mind. All were victims of extreme child abuse. Public concern is considerable and justified.

Figures recently produced by the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) confirm that these terrible examples represent the tip of an extending iceberg. The NSPCC report on child abuse says: 'Over the six year period 1979-84 the physical abuse of children has increased by 70%.' However, more recent figures show that four children are dying each week as a result of child abuse.

The NSPCC report demonstrates a disturbing correlation between unemployment and child abuse. This confirms the impression of those who work with these children and families that many of the factors which lead

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to child abuse are preventable. The report says:

'Even fewer caretakers of the abused children were in paid employment in 1983 and 1984 than in previous years. Less than 15% of the mothers were employed outside the home in contrast to around 50% of the mothers of dependent children nationally. Less than half the fathers were in paid employment in 1980 and the figure dropped to 30% in 1984.'

Simplistic statements about cause and effect should not be taken very seriously. It is not tenable that child abuse is simply caused by unemployment, the decline of supportive services for families, poverty, or the rise in the number of families where one parent is not biologically related to the child.

Stress is not uniform for all members of a community. Some people have a personality or circumstances which mean they are more able to withstand stress than others. But the strains imposed upon deprived families by unemployment, the associated pressures of social decline and the reduction of supportive services leads an increasing number of those families, under the greatest pressure, to crack under the strain.

But there are other causes. The heterosexual man is the most common sexual assailant of both boys and girls across all social and class boundaries (88% of sexual abuse is

committed by men). The reasons why men are so unable to cope with their sexuality as to need to humiliate and hurt children puts into sharp focus the feminist critique that rape and sexual assault is more about power and violence than sex.

However, mothers are significantly represented amongst the physical and emotional abusers of children. Again this may be due to the fact that in many families it is the mother who is left to bear the inordinate stress and responsibility for the children, often isolated and unsupported.

So, what is to be done? First of all the sacking of individual social workers by Brent Council as a response to the report into the killing of Jasmine Beckford is a disgrace. It is clear that in Brent individual inadequacy was transcended by a failure of the system. When Louis Blom-Cooper said that it could have happened anywhere in the country he was right. The Brent response is hardly likely to encourage social workers to make carefully considered and difficult choices. The focus of social work practice should return to the child rather than the parents. But it would be a disaster if social workers rushed to remove children from their homes as an insurance against the possibility of a tribunal of inquiry.

Working with child abuse requires a clarity

of judgement, a sensitivity of skill, a range of knowledge and an extent of experience which is just not compatible with the bureaucratic career structure of social services departments. In particular the line between professional supervision and support and day to day management has become confused beyond endurance.

All this could be reorganised without major structural change. More effective selection, longer and better training and, above all, the opportunity to work directly with skilled practitioners are all necessary.

Of course there will always be pathological abusers: their behaviour will be largely unpredictable and their circumstances untypical. However, much of the abuse of children could be prevented by social programmes directed against the sources of stress and a carefully coordinated service for children and families at risk.

If an effective system cannot produce competent social workers, that may be their fault, but if a proper system is unavailable that is ours. In the end it is a matter of resources which only government can provide. The title of the report into the killing of Jasmine Beckford *A Child In Trust* should remind us that as a society we have betrayed that trust.

David Pithers

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