



SOCIAL WORK AND NEGLECT 1948 – TODAY: FROM “THE CRUELTY MAN” AND “THE PROBLEM FAMILY” VIA “PREVENTION” TO “SAFEGUARDING

NEGLECT AND SERIOUS CASE REVIEWS – A PERSONAL REFLECTION

**SOCIAL WORK HISTORY GROUP 17 JUNE 2024, KINGS COLLEGE
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Outline

- Personal reflections: neglect context since late 80's and 20+ years of case review research
(<https://scr.researchinpractice.org.uk>)
- Re-framing neglect as potentially life threatening – help or hindrance?
- Neglect and practitioner thinking - start again syndrome
- What have SCRs contributed?



From
formal
inquiries
to
reviews –
most
cases
involve
NEGLECT

Formal inquiries have been used to examine, understand and respond to scandals and untoward incidents from Victorian times and earlier (Jones/ADCS, 2015)

Inquiries into 'tragedies' Dennis O'Neill (1945) Maria Colwell (1973) Jasmine Beckford (1984), Victoria Climbié (2000), Peter Connelly (Baby P)(2008) and many more – big impact on policy and practice
BUT 'Hard cases make bad law'

1980s and 1990s



Risk and dangerousness: neglect ‘child protection’ and ‘safeguarding’

- 1988 Post Beckford reframing of child abuse as child protection ‘Orange book’ (*Protecting Children: a guide for social workers undertaking a comprehensive assessment*) – 167 questions to be gone through mechanically to assess risk and dangerousness.
- Children Act 1989 from ‘protection’ to ‘safeguarding’ *Assessment Framework* 2000 – a relational, dynamic triangle BUT rigid timescales and still potentially ‘form-led’

From 1997:
New Labour
Initiatives - the
practitioner fit
with neglect?

Combatting child poverty

Sure Start

Every Child Matters (2003)

Early Help - Common Assessment
Framework and lead professionals

Neglect in Serious Case Reviews?

- Local case reviews from 1988 (Working Together). Called 'Part 8' Reviews from 1998, managed by ACPCs, later called SCRs, managed by LSCBs.
- Biennial, national overview reports of reviews commissioned from 1999 – to draw out key findings and identify implications for policy and practice.
- **Review reports required to be submitted to DH - BUT no central record kept of how many, or their findings. Many 'left' unsubmitted in desk drawers**
- Sinclair and Bullock (2002) and Rose and Barnes (2008) biennial overviews struggled to get a full or even partial sample

Neglect and SCRs

- The next 7 overview reports of SCRs from 2005 (Brandon, Sidebotham et al) tried to capture the full sample of reviews and key findings
- Lots of evidence of neglect (in up to 75%) of SCRs – rare mentions of poverty



**‘Reviews should not be an ordeal’
(DH 1999)**

**‘BLOOD ON THEIR HANDS’
The Sun**



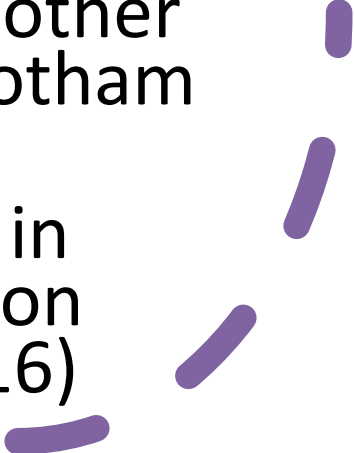
‘Baby P campaign’ launched in The Sun, (orchestrated by David Cameron as an assault against Labour) Ed Balls backed the campaign and called for sacking of Sharon Shoemsmith, Haringey Director

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The politics of SCRs

Neglect Post 2010

Baby P a 'neglect' case

- Children with CP plan who die of physical assault (like Peter Connelly) are more likely to have a CP plan for neglect (56%) than for physical abuse (37%)
 - It affects children of all ages (adolescents are the **most** neglected age group [Rees et al 2011]). Peter Connelly grown up?
 - It co-exists with other abuse – (features in up to 75% of SCRs) and is a risk for other forms of harm (Sidebotham et al 2016)
 - **AND** NB child neglect in general child population (Sidebotham et al 2016)
- 
- A series of four thick, purple, brushstroke-like lines are arranged in a curved pattern on the right side of the slide.

Practice dilemmas, re-framing neglect as serious, potentially life threatening

- Better understanding that neglect has far-reaching health and welfare consequences across the life span (Norman et al 2012) etc
- It often co-exists with poverty (Bywaters et al 2016) and inequality (Eckenrode et al 2014) **and** places considerable financial burdens on societies (Mason and Bywaters, 2016)
- Dilemmas about how to respond
- Neglect research collaboration with NSPCC

Typology of neglect – how neglect can be potentially life threatening (Brandon et al 2012;2014,2020)

Malnutrition

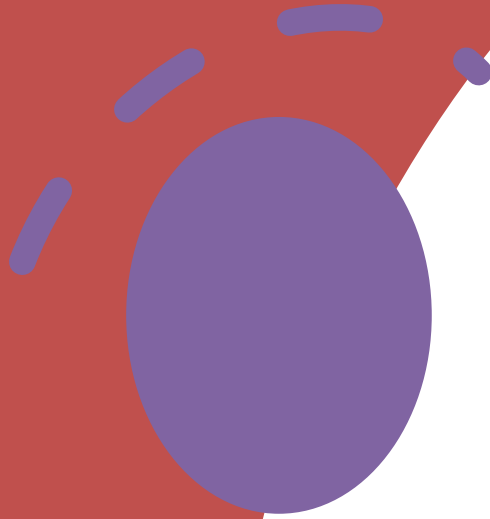
Medical neglect

Accidents with
some elements of
forewarning

SUDI in a context
of neglectful care
and a hazardous
environment

Neglect in
combination with
physical abuse

Suicide among
young people



NEGLECT AND PRACTITIONER THINKING

Neglect: Professional responses

Fixed views
about family,
Fixed
assessment
views
(eg neglect)

Overwhelmed chaotic families,
negative family support,
drugs, violence,
mental ill health, criminality

Invisible children

Efforts not to be judgemental, whole picture missed, silo practice.

Too much to achieve, low expectations, 'success' is getting through the door, muddle about confidentiality



‘START AGAIN SYNDROME’

Case study baby K

Baby K
died
aged 8
weeks.
6th child
of family

- Differing professional views about the acceptability of poor, unhygienic conditions at home and other concerns.
- Differing views about baby's possible failure to thrive. Serious concerns from school about older siblings.
- History of neglect, violence (between parents and towards children and from children) maternal depression, parental drug misuse. Father had conviction for violence with weapons. Sibling in residential care.

Professional Learning

- Dangers of professionals 'starting again' with a new baby (Start again syndrome).
- Increased family stresses missed (not coping with large family, worsening conditions at home, increased parental substance misuse).
- Professional fear leaves children unprotected.
- Lack of sustained professional challenge. Preoccupation with threshold rather than shared responsibilities.

Learning from SCRs

- Wood Review (2016) called SCRs “a toxic brand” – they and LSCBs were phased out by 2019 – replaced by Local Safeguarding Partnerships and Local Safeguarding Child Practice Reviews.
- In the SCR research we tried to be cautious, compassionate and rigorous . We found that most children known to the CP system are protected and death from abuse rates have remained stable
- Practitioners and LSCBs said they found our reports helpful, but SCRs combined with austerity have cast a shadow over SW practice

The cumulative impact of austerity

- Neglect still ‘the wallpaper of practice’ (Morris) still the largest category of CP plan 49.3%, [DfE 2023])
- 2023 new highest rate for child protection enquiries (s47) driven by cuts to preventive services – now often **not** leading to child protection plans. Irreparable damage to families getting little or no help after decade + of austerity (Community Care 2023).
- Astonishing, and heartening, to see the continued commitment and creativity from social workers.

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