



Lancaster University
Medical School

Child neglect, family welfare, social work and the state in Britain, 1948-74

Social work and neglect 1948 – today: from “the cruelty man” and “the problem family” via “prevention” to “safeguarding”

Social Work History Network (SWHN), King’s College London, 2-4pm Monday 17th June 2024

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Running order

1/ Background. The emergence of 'the problem family' and the politics of professionalism and children in the making of welfare state, c. 1940-50

2/ What is 'the problem family'? Competing professional discourses of, and understanding about, 'the problem family', c. 1943-63.

3/ Neglect and the state. The establishment and governance of local coordinating committees for 'children neglected or ill-treated in their own homes', c. 1950-70.

4/ Family welfare and social work. The role of residential and domiciliary voluntary social work organisations in 'problem family' prevention and rehabilitation, c. 1943-70.

5/ Social work on trial. The decline of 'the problem family' and the rise of child abuse expertise in a context of welfare state reform, c. 1963-74.

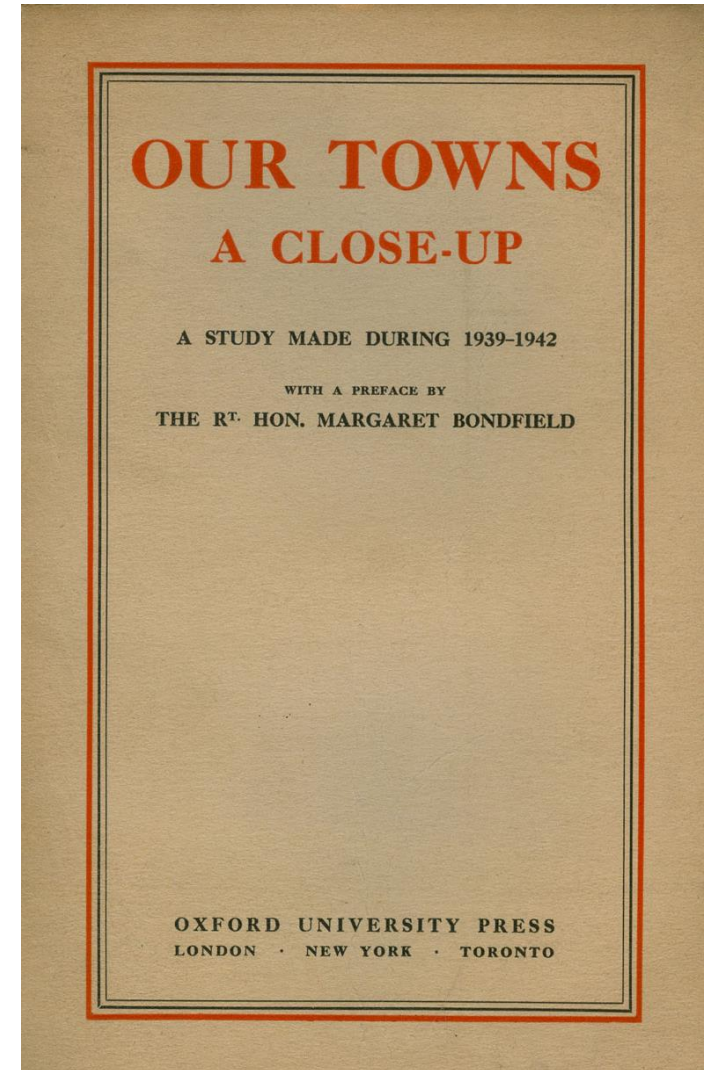
1. Background

Evacuation and moral panic

The effect of the evacuation was to flood the dark places with light and bring home to the national consciousness that the “submerged tenth” described by Charles Booth still exists in our towns like a hidden sore, poor, dirty and crude in habits, an intolerable and degrading burden to decent people forced by poverty to neighbour with it

... “problem families,” always on the edge of pauperism and crime, riddled with mental and physical defects, in and out of the Courts for child neglect, a menace to the community, of which the gravity is out of all proportion to their numbers.

Source: Women's Group on Public Welfare, *Our towns: a close-up* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), xiii.



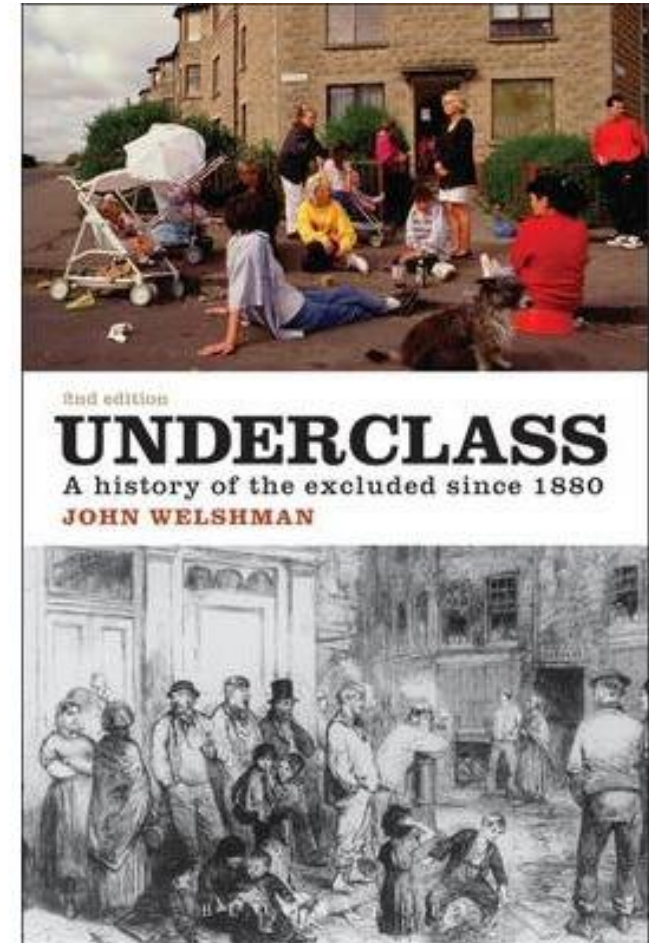
Dark places and light?

The concept of an intergenerational underclass displaying a high concentration of social problems – remaining outwith the boundaries of citizenship, alienated from cultural norms and stubbornly impervious to the normal incentives of the market, social work intervention or state welfare – **has been reconstructed periodically over at least the past one hundred years**, and while there have been important shifts of emphasis between each of these reconstructions, there have also been striking continuities.

Source: J. Macnicol, 'In pursuit of the underclass', *Journal of Social Policy*, 16:3 (1987), 296.

Moral panics and the poor

- c. 1880s 'Residuum' and 'submerged tenth'
- c. 1900s 'Unemployable'
- c. 1920/30s 'Social problem group'
- c. 1940/50s 'Problem family'
- c. 1960s 'Culture of poverty'
- c. 1970s 'Cycle of deprivation'
- c. 1980/90s 'Underclass'
- c. 1990/2000s 'Social exclusion'
- c. 2010s 'Troubled family'



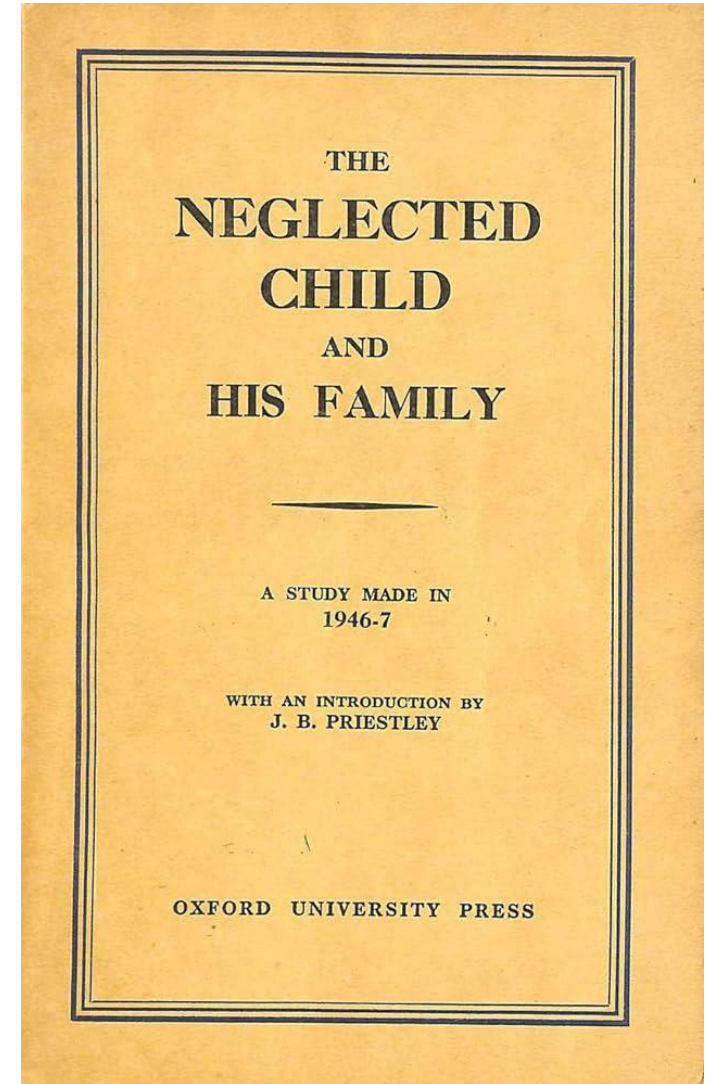
The politics of 'the problem family'

[I]t was the apparently contradictory nature of the [Our Towns] report that explains its powerful appeal in wartime – it echoed interwar debates about behaviour and citizenship, but also reflected the ideas that would shape the welfare state in the post-war years.

Source: John Welshman, 'Evacuation, hygiene and social policy: the *Our Towns* report of 1943', *Historical Journal*, 42:3 (1999), 786.

There can be no doubt, therefore, that whether we are taking the standards accepted legally as constituting neglect amounting to cruelty, or the higher standards we should like to see in force, **the amount of child-suffering involved is sufficiently high to constitute an urgent problem.**

Source: Women's Group on Public Welfare, *The neglected child and his family: a study made in 1946-7* (London: Oxford University Press, 1943), 19.



Child neglect and the welfare state

Nov 1942	Beveridge Report <i>Social insurance and allied services</i>
April 1943	WGPW report <i>Our towns</i> .
July 1944	Lady Allen's letter to <i>The Times</i> on residential child care.
May 1945	Monckton Report into the death of Dennis O'Neill.
Sept 1946	Curtis Report published into provision of child care, recommending one service.
July 1948	Children Act 1948 passed and implemented
Aug 1948	WGPW report <i>The neglect child and his family</i>
July 1949	Parliamentary question by Barbara Ayrton-Gould MP (Labour) on child neglect
Dec 1949	Further Parliamentary question by Barbara Ayrton-Gould MP (Labour) on child neglect
July 1950	Inter-departmental working group on child neglect issue joint circular <ol style="list-style-type: none">1/ Reject additional legislation on child neglect2/ Home Office, Ministries of Health and Education involved3/ Circular advocated 'coordination committees' chaired by one official

2. What is 'the problem family'?

Why ‘the problem family’?

The phenomenon of the “problem family” clearly relates to a number of important themes in the 1950s including the emphasis on the family in debates about postwar reconstruction, the declining role of eugenics, the development of influential psychological theories, and attitudes to mothers in the workplace and the home.

Source: John Welshman, ‘In search of the “problem family”: public health and social work in England and Wales, 1940-70’, *Social History of Medicine*, 9:3 (1996), 448.

In many respects, the numerous reports published about “problem families” tell us little of value about the families themselves and rather more about professional rivalries and connections.

Source: John Welshman, ‘The social history of social work: the issue of the “problem family”, 1940-70’, *British Journal of Social Work*, 29:3 (1999), 458.

Definitions: Public health

But there are still "derelict families," as they are sometimes called. These families for one reason or another have not kept pace with social progress and are a brake on the wheels. They are the despair of health departments, education authorities, N.S.P.C.C. inspectors, and indeed of anyone who attempts to improve their lot in life.

Source: Robert C. Wofinden, 'Problem families', *Public Health*, 57:2 (1944), 137.

The problem consists in the presence, in a developed civilisation, of families, or groups of families, and I make the addition advisedly, who have stone age standards of conduct in the cities of an age of steel.

Source: Clare O. Stallybrass, 'Problem families', *Social Work*, 4:2 (1947), 30.

[T]he problem family presents a unique complex of features, no one family being quite like another. All have one characteristic, that of being unable by their own efforts to raise themselves from the state into which they have fallen.

Source: C. Fraser Brockington, 'Problem families', *Medical Officer*, 77 (1947), 75.

Definitions: Social work

Problem families are easy to recognise and describe, but surprisingly hard to define. Unemployment, pawn tickets, rent arrears, debts, child neglect, undernourishment, mental deficiency, mental illness, drunkenness and squalor, coals or worse in the bath – all are characteristic, and none are indispensable.

Source: Elizabeth E. Irvine, 'Research into problem families: theoretical questions arising from Dr Blacker's investigations', *British Journal of Psychiatric Social Work*, 9:2 (1954), 24.

Their lives are characterised by dirt, disintegration and disorder. They are often shiftless, apathetic, irresponsible to an almost incredible degree.

Source: David Jones, 'Family Service Units for problem families', *Eugenics Review*, 41:4 (1950), 171.

The problem family has to be seen as an administrative problem and as a challenge to social casework.

Source: A. Fred Philp and Noel Timms, *The problem of "the problem family"* (London: Family Service Units, 1957), 66.

Criticisms: Social policy

These earlier concepts are, however, worth reviving because they show how strong was the determination, even up to quite recent times, to identify social or economic inferiority with personal inadequacy, and to assume that, whatever its immediate ostensible cause, it is the quality of the poor which explains their poverty.

Indeed, a problem family might well be defined as one whose consumption of social workers' time greatly exceeds the average of the local community.

About the only common characteristics of these [problem] families, it seems, are the financial ones.

Source: Barbara Wootton, *Social science and social pathology* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1959), 54, 55, 56.



3. Neglect and the state

Joint Circular, 31 July 1950

943,863/20

Circular 157/50.....
(Home Office)

Circular 78/50.....
(Ministry of Health)

Circular 225/50.....
(Ministry of Education)

31st July, 1950.

To

County Councils } for action
County Borough Councils }
Metropolitan Borough Councils } for information
County District Councils }

London

Joint Circular from the Home Office,
Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education.

CHILDREN NEGLECTED OR ILL-TREATED IN THEIR OWN HOMES.

1. The Secretary of State, the Minister of Health and the Minister of Education, in consultation with the Secretary of State for Scotland, have had under consideration what more might be done to prevent the neglect or ill-treatment of children in their own homes, and a copy of a statement on the subject which was made by the Secretary of State in Parliament on 20th July, 1950, is appended.

2. The action to be taken on the discovery of neglect or ill-treatment must necessarily depend on the circumstances of the case. Neglect and ill-treatment are due to a wide variety of causes, ranging from the poor health of an affectionate mother to brutality and dislike of the child. Among other contributory factors are lack of help in the home, bad housing, ignorance of the elementary principles of home management, sub-normality of one or both parents or of the child, frequent pregnancies, laziness, and unhappy relations between parents. It is apparent that, while in some cases prosecution and the removal of the child from home may be the only possible course, in many it will be feasible to remove or mitigate the causes of neglect by social action.

3. In their capacities as health authority, education authority, welfare authority, housing authority, and as the authority for the purposes of the Children Act, 1948, local authorities have powers to assist families and so avoid the enforced removal of children from their homes. In particular there are: the arrangements for the care of expectant and nursing mothers and of children not attending school which the local health authority have a duty to make under the National Health Service Act; the health visiting service which they have a duty to provide, either direct or through the agency of voluntary organisations; the arrangements which may be made for the prevention of illness, the care of persons suffering from illness or mental deficiency, or the after-care of such persons; and the domestic help services which may be provided where help is required owing to the presence of any person who is ill, a child or an old person. Where the care of an old or handicapped person is involved, the welfare department of the local authority may be able to help under the National Assistance Act, 1948. Further assistance may be rendered by the housing manager, school attendance officer and sanitary inspector in cases which fall within their scope. Where there is a mental health problem, the psychiatric or other social worker might usefully be consulted. For those who are able and willing to make use of them, there are also the general facilities for further education, including instruction in housecraft and other craft, provided by local education authorities under the Education Acts. Education authorities may also provide leisure-time facilities for school children and young people who have left school. Where the mother is ill or for other reasons is unable to look after her children, and cannot arrange for them to be cared for suitably by a relative or friend, it may be that the local authority to receive the children into care temporarily under the Children Act, 1948.

A. If a

4. If a family is in need of financial aid the National Assistance Board may be able to assist. The Board's visiting officers report matters which come to their notice and which seem to be relevant to the welfare of the family, so that other agencies can be brought in where appropriate.

5. The voluntary organisations specially formed to deal with neglect and ill-treatment of children are the societies for the prevention of cruelty to children, namely the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, the Liverpool Society and the Birkenhead and Wirral Society. These societies are authorised to institute care or protection proceedings under the Children and Young Persons Act, 1933. In addition, there are other voluntary organisations concerned with the welfare of families generally which assist in dealing with cases of neglect.

6. If effective help is to be given at an early stage, it is essential that there should be co-ordinated use of the statutory and voluntary services. Some authorities have already taken steps to this end, and the Ministers are convinced that it is by means of improved co-ordination that this complex problem can best be dealt with. Without co-ordination, information may not reach the service which could be of most assistance until valuable time has been lost. If the right help is not given in time, children who might otherwise have remained with their parents may have to be removed from home because deterioration has gone too far.

7. The Ministers accordingly ask the Council to ensure that in their area the most effective use is made of existing resources. It will be for the local authority to determine what steps they should take to this end, but it is suggested that the necessary co-operation could be achieved by arrangements on the following lines:-

(a) to designate through one of their existing committees, or themselves designate, an officer to be responsible under them for enlisting the interest of those concerned and devising arrangements to secure full co-operation among all the local services, statutory and voluntary, which are concerned with the welfare of children in their own homes. In counties, the co-operation of the housing and sanitary authorities would no doubt be sought;

(b) to arrange for the designated officer to hold regular meetings of officers of the local authority and other statutory services, and of local representatives of the voluntary organisations. In counties, it might be thought desirable to have the meetings in a number of sub-areas, particularly where schemes of decentralised administration of local health services are being operated;

(c) to arrange for significant cases of child neglect, and all cases of ill-treatment, coming to the notice of any statutory or voluntary service in the area to be reported to the designated officer, who would arrange for such cases to be brought before the meeting so that, after considering the needs of the family as a whole, agreement might be reached as to how the local services could best be applied to meet those needs.

8. Local authorities are asked to inform the Home Office of the arrangements which they have made. Questions arising out of these arrangements which relate to particular services of the authority should be referred to the central department concerned with that service.

9. The cost of measures taken by the local authority to deal with particular cases of neglect should, as at present, be met by the service concerned. The administrative expenses of co-ordination should be charged to the service in which the officer made responsible for this is employed, and will attract any Subsidy grant applicable to that service.

J. A. Newsam
W. S. Douglas
John P. R. Gandy

APPENDIX

Statement made by the Secretary of State in Parliament
on 20th July, 1950.

The Government have, as promised, considered the issues which were raised in the Debates in Parliament in July and December of last year on the subject of children neglected or ill-treated in their own homes. They have been assisted by a report furnished to their Ministers by a Working Party of officials of the Home Office, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Education; and the corresponding Scottish Departments, which examined the various aspects of the matter.

The Government have reached the conclusion that the present need is not for an extension of statutory powers, or for inquiry by a Departmental committee, but for the fully co-ordinated use of the local authority and other statutory and voluntary services available. Local authorities already have wide powers to assist families, and health visitors, teachers, school attendance officers and others in regular contact with children are in a position to assist in bringing cases of neglect or ill-treatment to light. In addition, voluntary organisations, in particular the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children and the Royal Scottish Society are engaged in work in this field. The resources of local statutory and voluntary effort cannot however, be used to the best advantage unless there is effective co-ordination. It is of the first importance that help where needed should be given at an early stage, and that information should reach the service which could be of most assistance before valuable time has been lost and harm has been done. If the right help is not given in time, children who might otherwise have remained with their parents may have to be removed from home because deterioration has gone too far.

The Government have accordingly decided that the right course is

/to ask

to ask local authorities to introduce arrangements designed to ensure that action is co-ordinated to make the most effective use of the available resources, statutory and voluntary alike. The councils of counties and county boroughs (in Scotland, the councils of counties and large burghs) are being asked to make suitable arrangements to secure co-ordination among all the local services, statutory and voluntary, which are concerned with the welfare of children in their own homes. This might well be achieved by designating an officer of the local authority whose task would be to ensure such co-ordination. By this means, significant cases of child neglect and all cases of ill-treatment coming to the notice of any statutory or voluntary service in the area could be considered, and agreement reached as to how the local services could best be applied to meet the need. The Government are convinced that it is on these lines that the problem can best be tackled, and are confident that local authorities and voluntary organisations concerned can be relied upon to co-operate freely in putting the arrangements into effect.

15514/50

Source: The National Archives (TNA), Kew: MH 134/181 Home Office, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Education, 'Children neglected or ill-treated in their own homes', Joint Circular 157/50, 78/50, 225/50, 31 July 1950

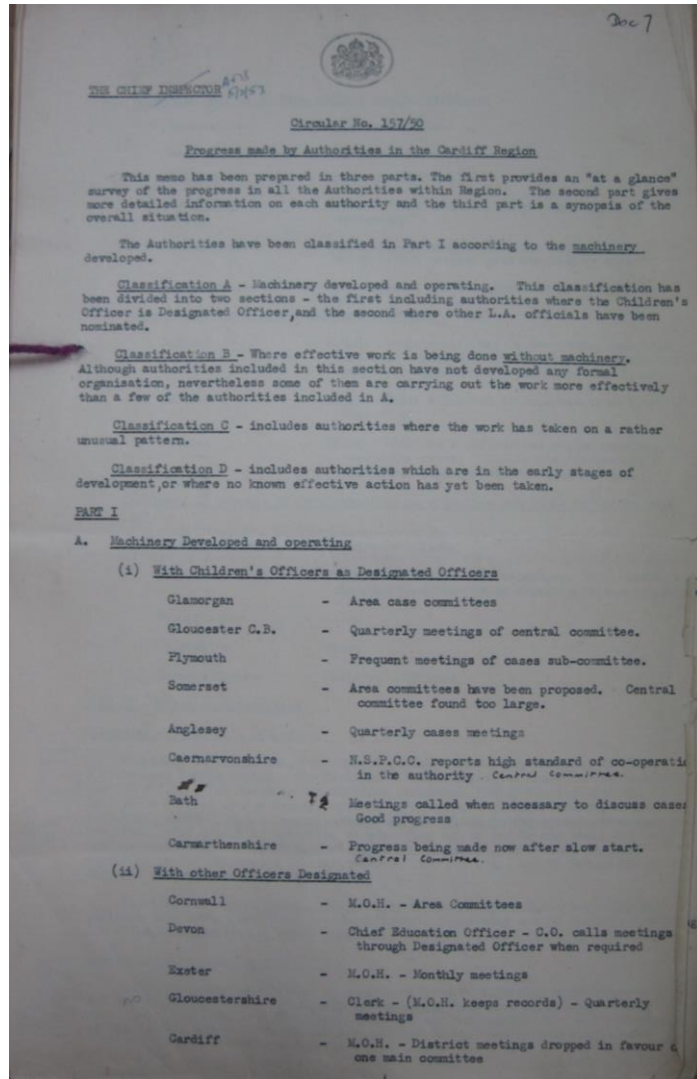
Coordinating Committees, 1959

Designated Officer	Total	Main committee only		Main and area committees or local case conferences		Area committee(s) or local case conferences only		No committees or case conferences	
		County Council	County Borough Council	County Council	County Borough Council	County Council	County Borough Council	County Council	County Borough Council
Town Clerk	19	4	5	0	0	7	0	3	0
Medical Officer of Health	38	2	17	1	5	6	6	1	0
Children's Officer	54	7	15	2	8	11	1	4	6
Other	3	0	1	0	0	2	0	0	0
Total	114	13	38	3	13	26	7	8	6

Source: Eileen Younghusband, *Report of the working party on social workers in the local authority health and welfare service* (London: HMSO, 1959), appendix F, table 54, p. 361.

Central-Local State Relations

Source: TNA: MH 102/1981 B. Evans (Home Office Senior Inspector), 'Circular No. 157/50: Progress made by authorities in the Cardiff Region', 24 January 1953.



The Children's Department inspectorate is the lynch pin in the administration of the children's services. Most of the personal contact between central and local government is through the inspectors, who live and work in various regions of the country. Their functions are essentially advisory and they have no formal powers, other than the right to enter premises and to inspect certain case records and registers. Nevertheless they have considerable influence.

Most questions however are settled in informal, "unofficial" letters exchanged between inspectors and children's officers

Source: J. A. G Griffith, *Central departments and local authorities* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1966), 366.

Legislation and Professional Power

National Health Service Act 1946, Part III: Health Services Provided by Local Health Authorities, Section 28: Prevention of Illness, Care and After-Care

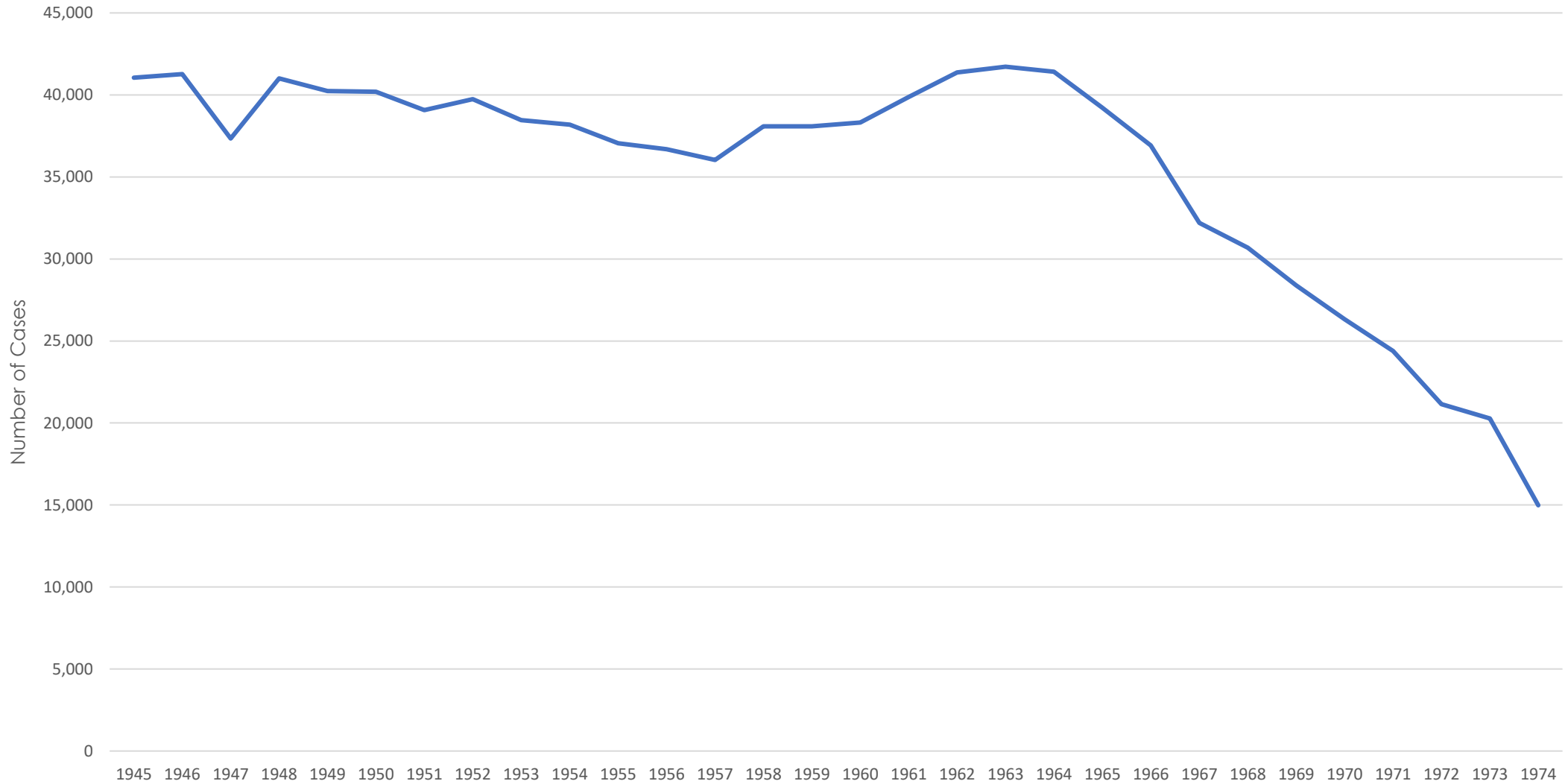
A local health authority may with the approval of the Minister, and to such an extent as the Minister may direct shall, make arrangements **for the purpose of the prevention of illness**, the care of persons suffering from illness or mental defectiveness, or the after-care of such persons...

Children and Young Persons Act 1963, Part I: Care and Control of Children and Young Persons, Section 1: Extension of Power to Promote Welfare of Children

It shall be the duty of every local authority to make available such advice, guidance and assistance as may **promote the welfare of children by diminishing the need to receive children into or keep them in care... or to bring children before a juvenile court**; and any provisions made by a local authority under this subsection may, if the local authority think fit, include provision for giving assistance in kind or, in exceptional circumstances, in cash.

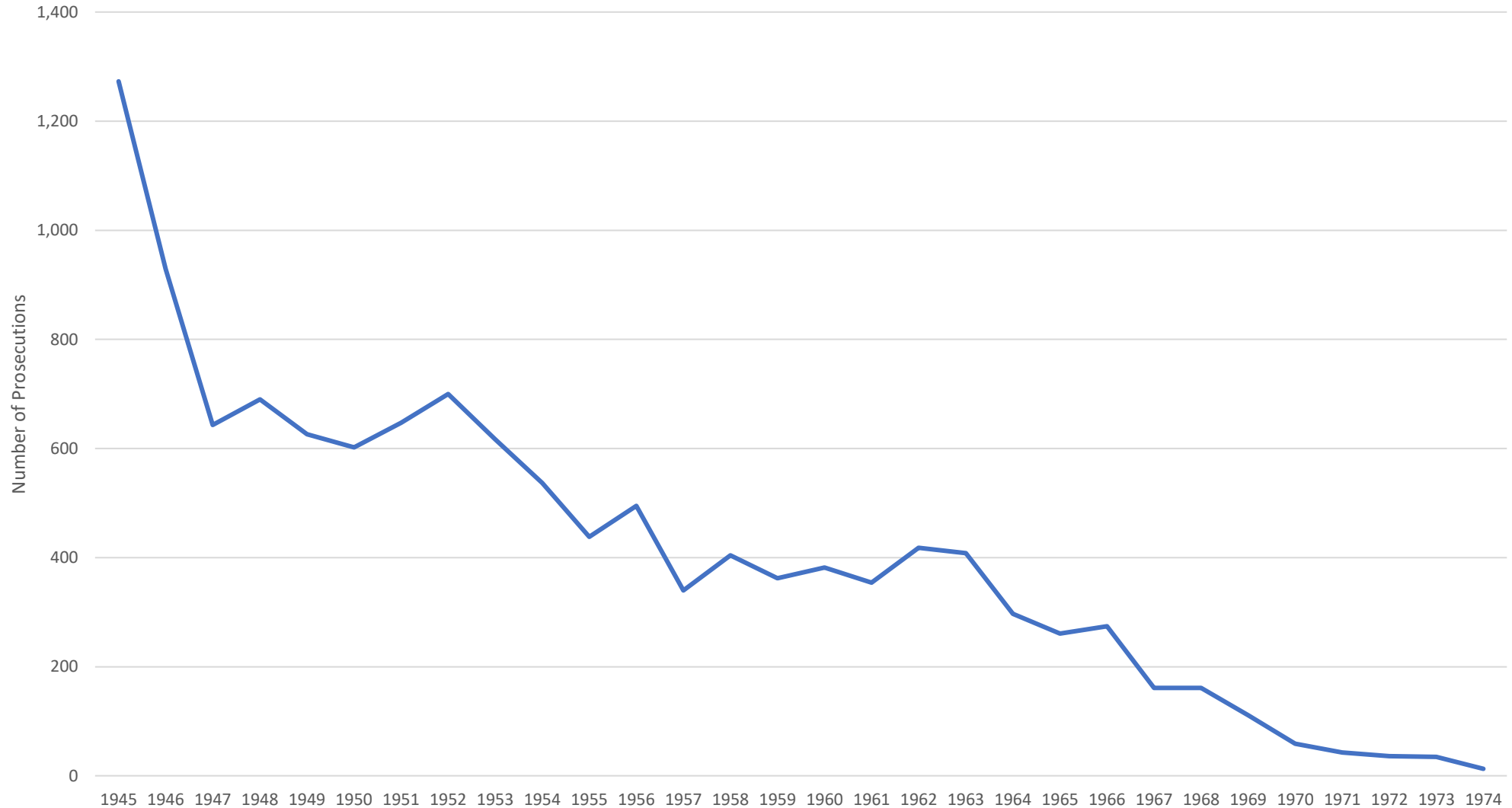
Child Neglect: NSPCC Cases

Source: NSPCC Library and Archives, London: 1/7 Annual reports for the NSPCC, 1945-74; Home Office, Report on the work of the Children's Department, 1951-63.



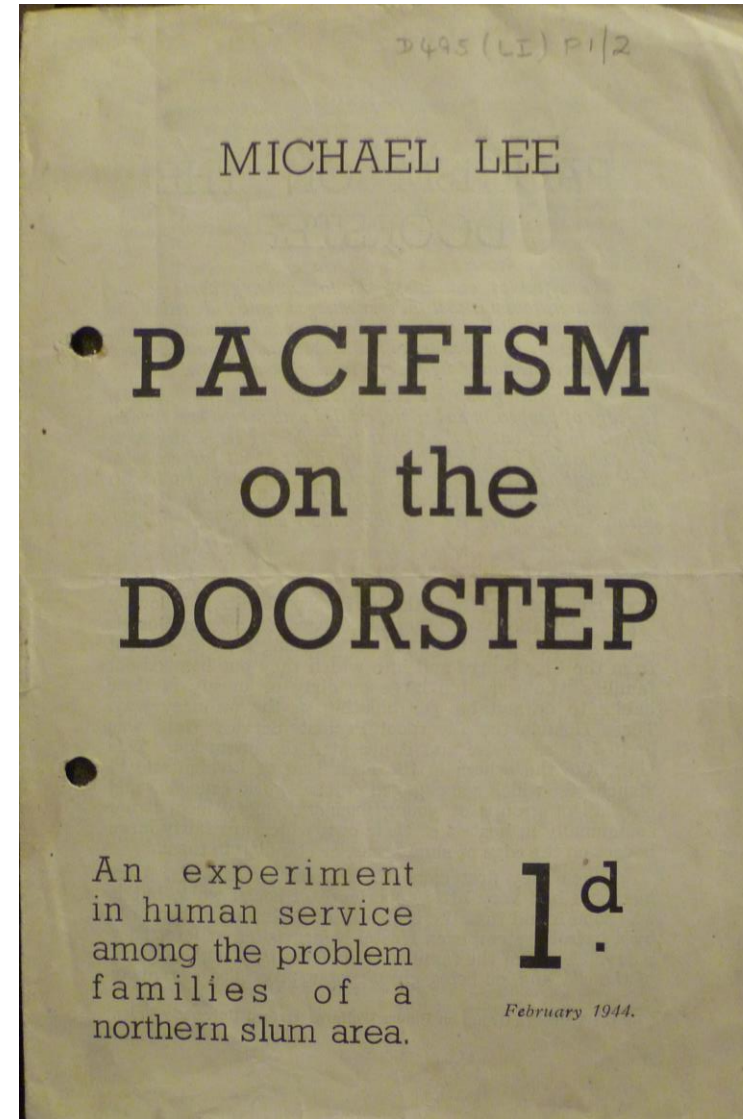
Child Neglect: NSPCC Prosecutions

Source: NSPCC Library and Archives, London: 1/7 Annual reports for the NSPCC, 1945-74; HO, Report on the work of the Children's Department, 1951-63.



4. Family welfare and social work

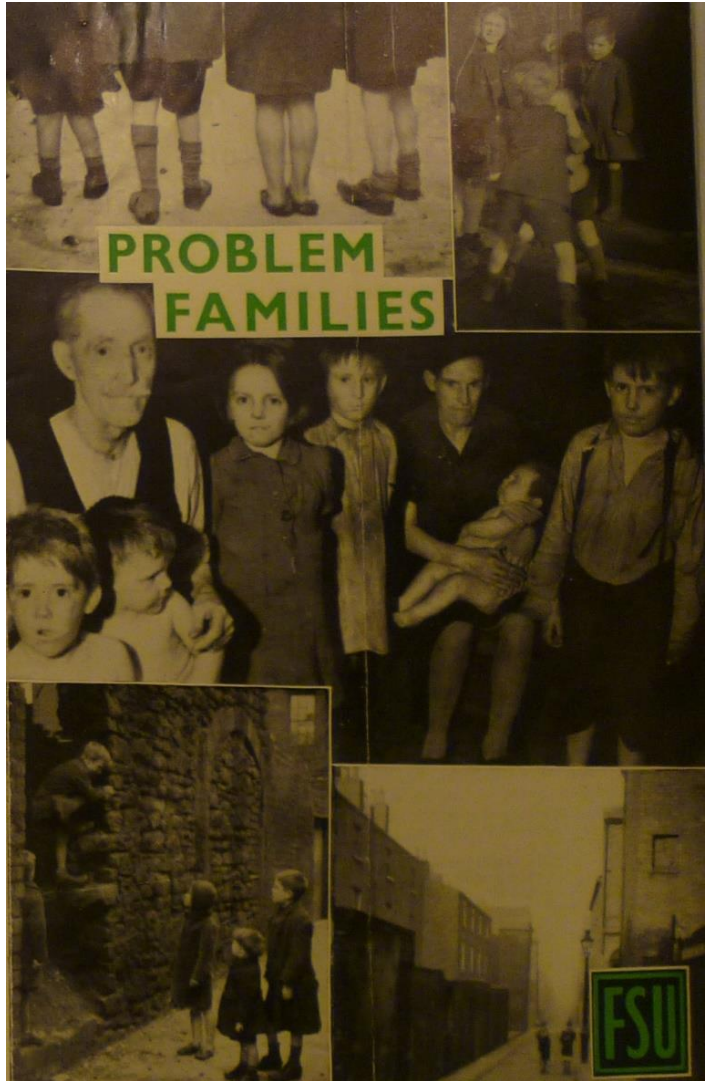
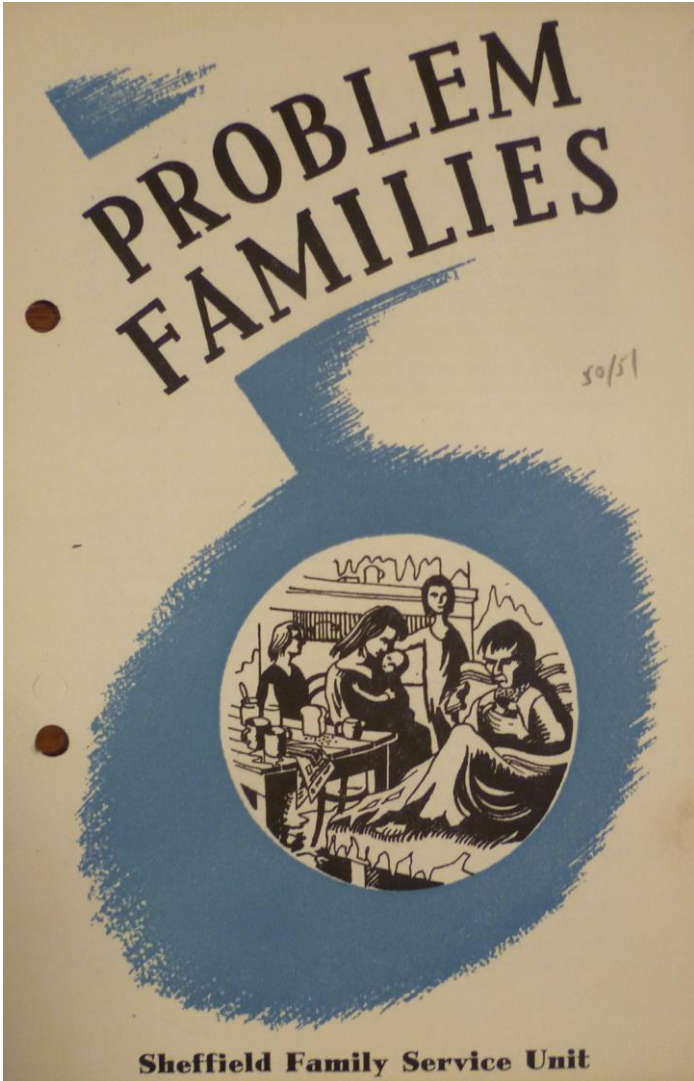
Evacuation, P/FSU and Brentwood



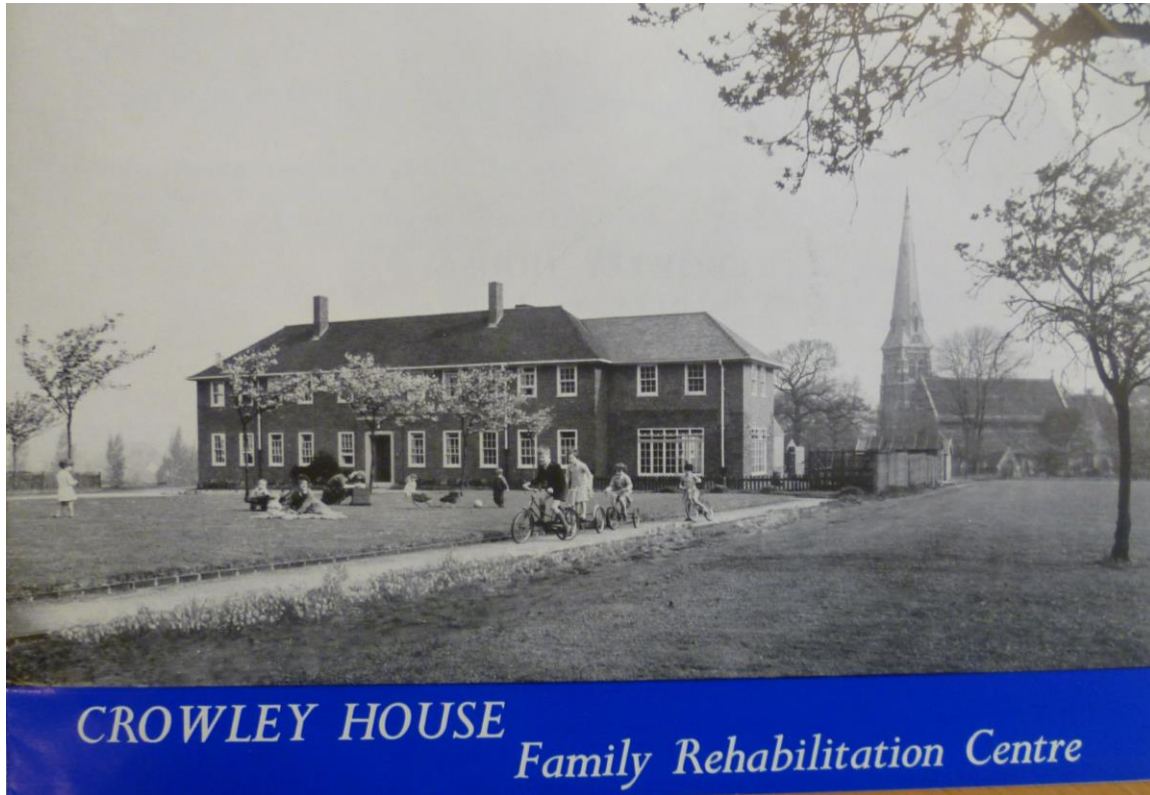
Source: Community Futures, Preston: 'Recuperation for mother and child', Nursing Mirror, 19 July 1947; Liverpool University Special Collections and Archives, Liverpool: D495(LI)P1/2 Michael Lee, Pacifism on the doorstep (London: Family Service Units, 1944).

Domiciliary Prevention

Sources: LUSCA: D495(SH)M5 Annual report for Sheffield FSU, 1950-51; D495(OL)M2/1 Annual report of Oldham and District FSU, 1969-70; Wellcome Library, London: SA/EUG/D/168 FSU 'Problem Families,' n.d. [c. 1946]



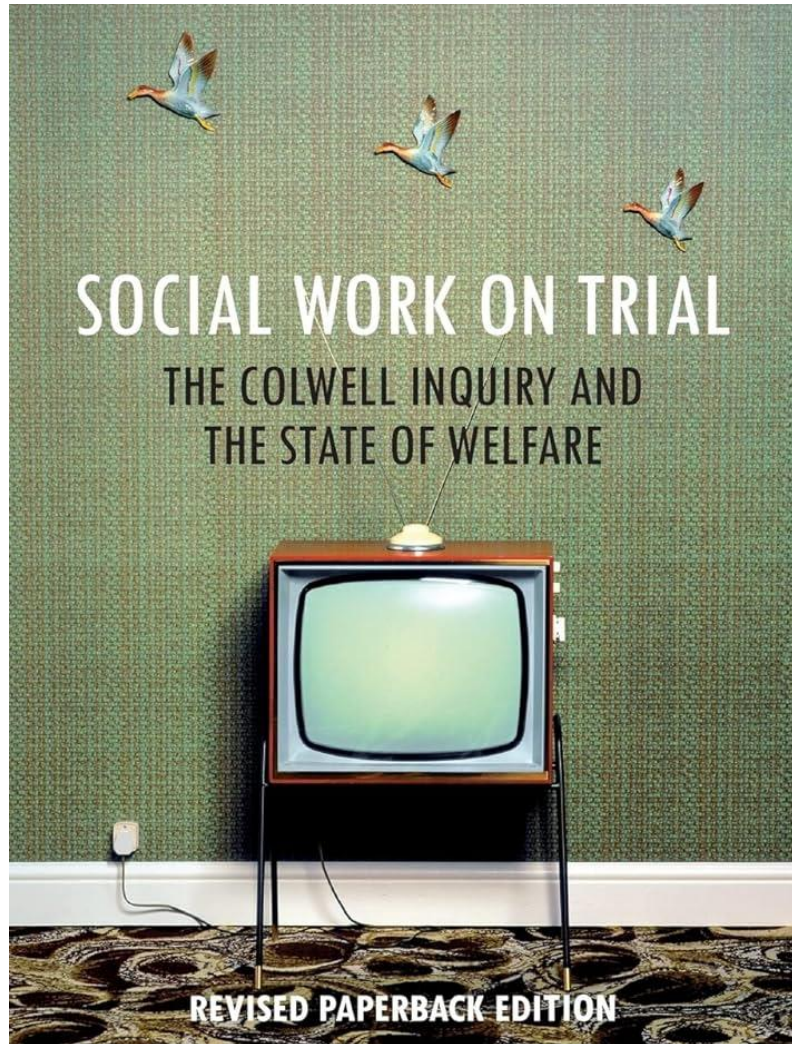
Residential Rehabilitation



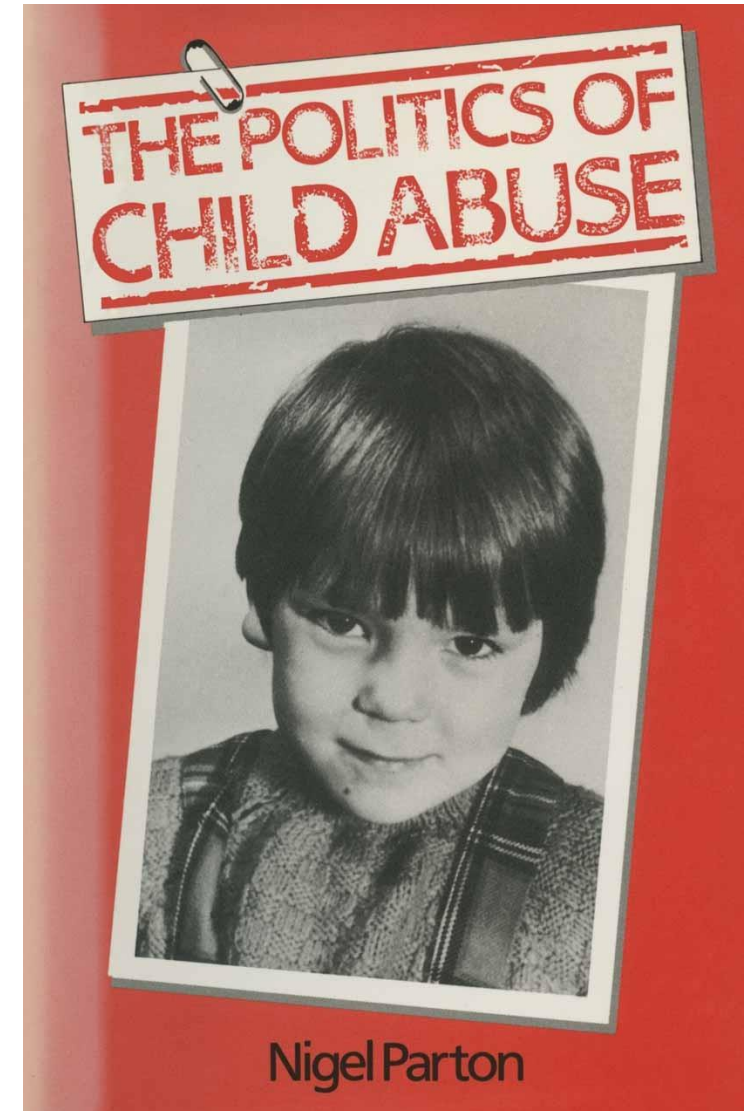
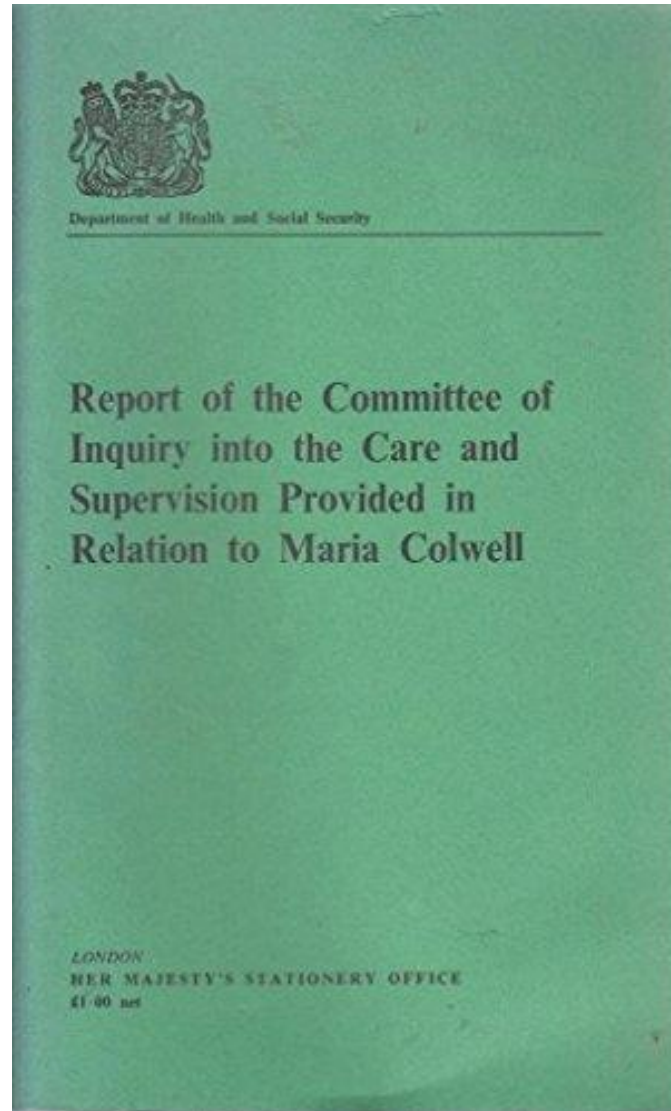
Sources: Centre International Joseph Wresinski, Paris: XH42/VII.2 GB Middlemore Homes, Crowley House Family Rehabilitation Centre, n.d. [c. 1966]; XH113/VII.2 GB Frimhurst Recuperative Home, Frimhurst – A new lease of life for families, n.d. [c. 1963]

5. Social work on trial

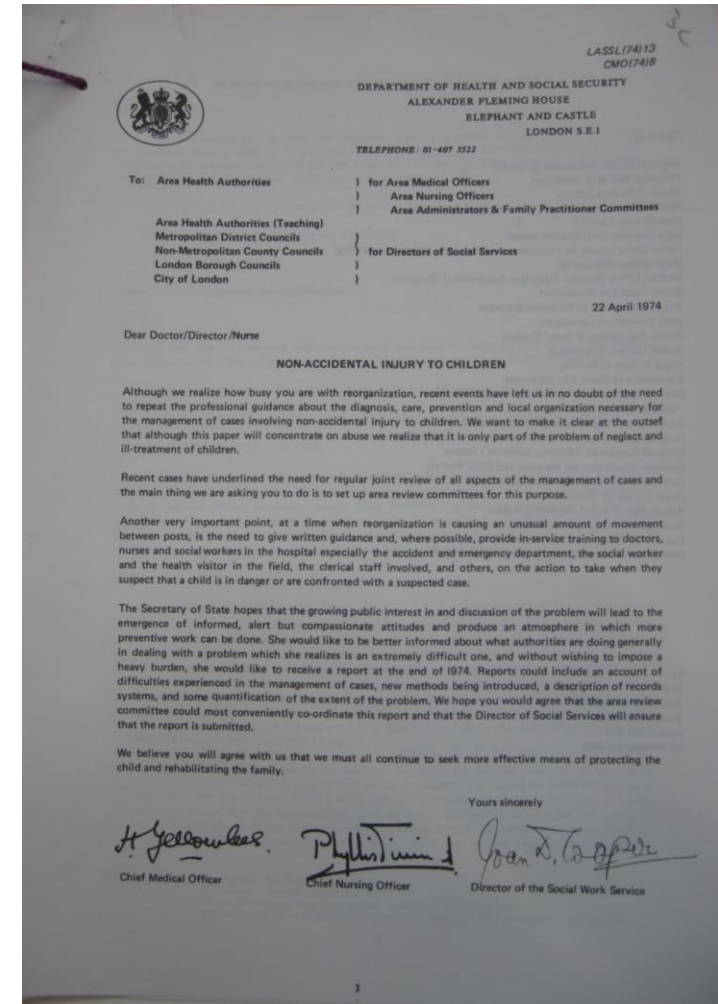
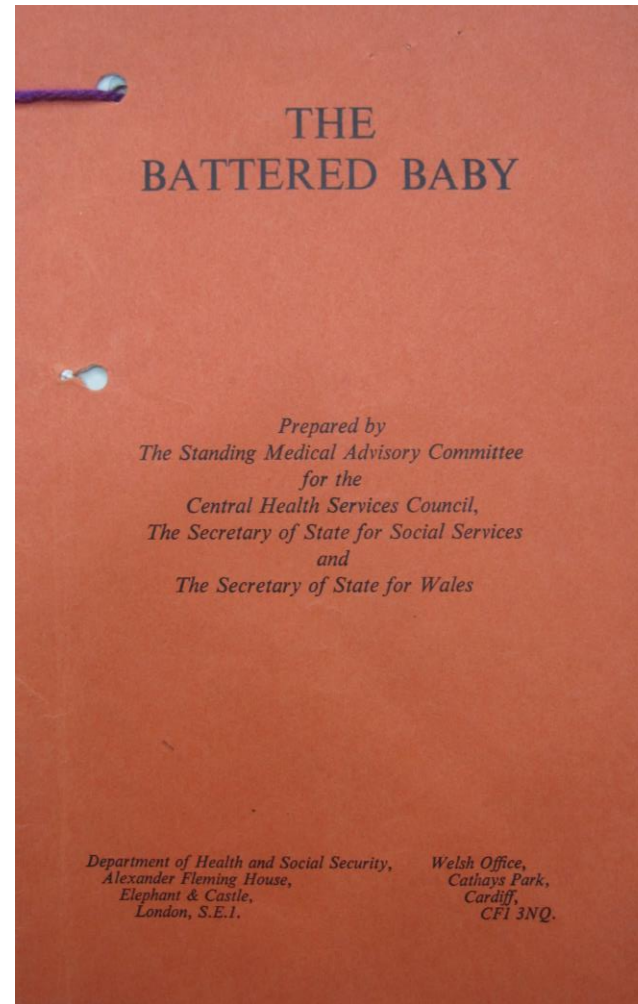
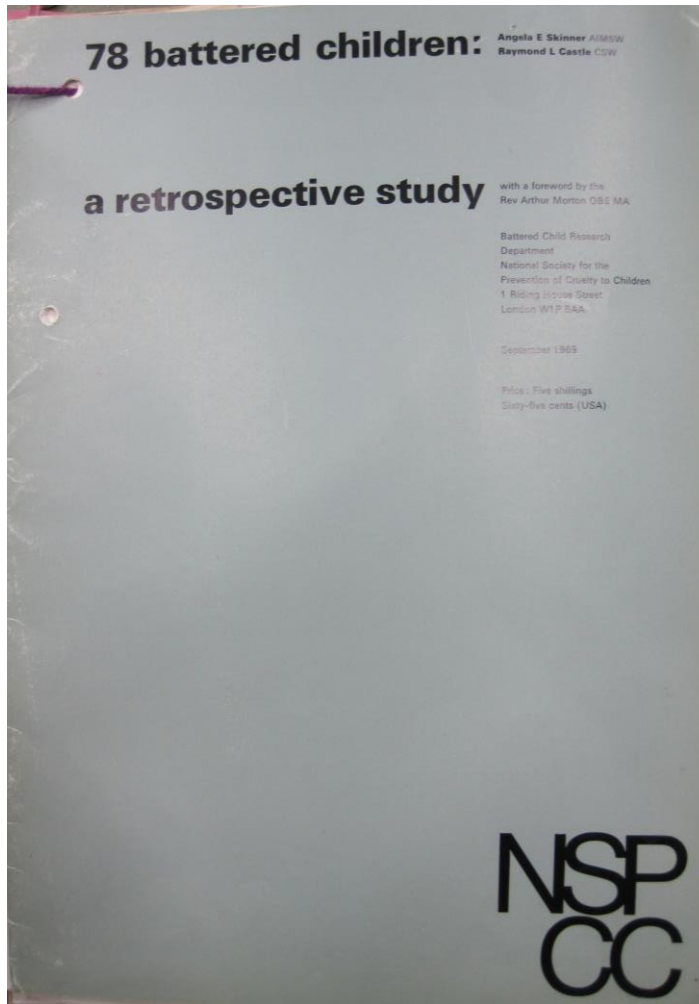
Neglect to abuse in social work



IAN BUTLER AND MARK DRAKEFORD



'Battered babies'



Sources: TNA: BN 29/1939 Angela E. Skinner and Raymond L. Castle, *78 battered children: a retrospective study* (London: NSPCC Battered Child Research Department, 1969); Central Health Services Council Standing Medical Advisory Committee, *The battered baby* (London: DHSS, 1970); MH 159/519 DHSS, 'Non-accidental injury to children', Circular LASSL(74)13, 22 April 1974

Reforming the welfare and the state

The way in which the Seebohm Committee defined the basic problems of the personal social services – the lack of resources, inadequate knowledge and divided responsibility – placed important constraints upon the conclusions reached. **A large department was, in their view, necessary to attract resources and develop the planning capability to assess needs.** Moreover, if divided responsibility was a major weakness, then solutions which involved the coordination of more than one department employing social workers were unlikely to be chosen.

Source: Penelope Hall, *Reforming the welfare: the politics of change in the personal social services* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 77.

1964-67 Maud Report on Management in Local Government

1965-67 Mallaby Report on Staffing in Local Government

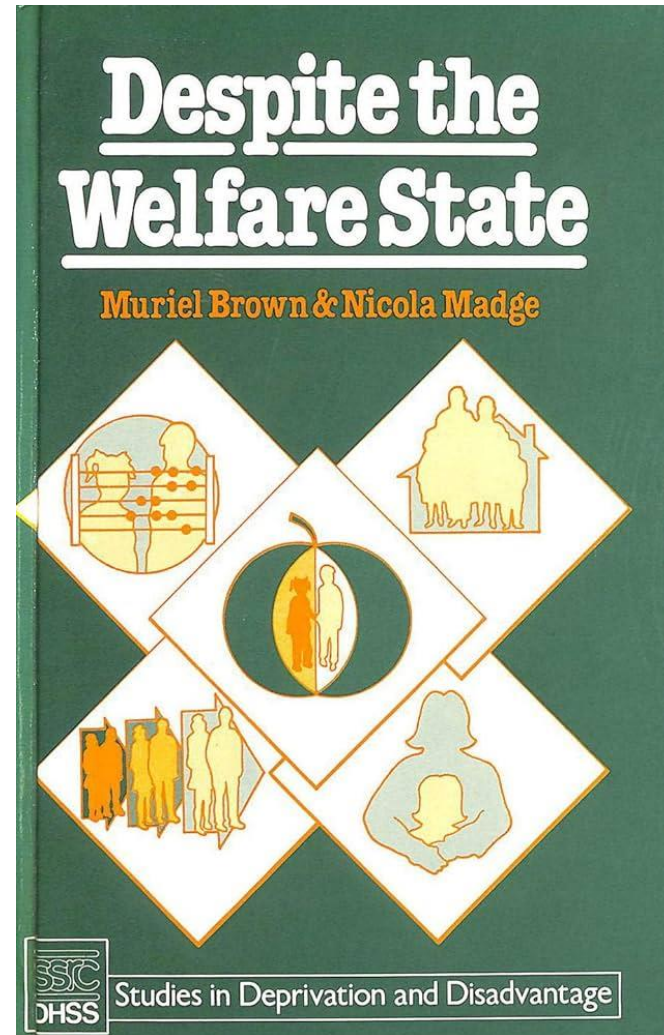
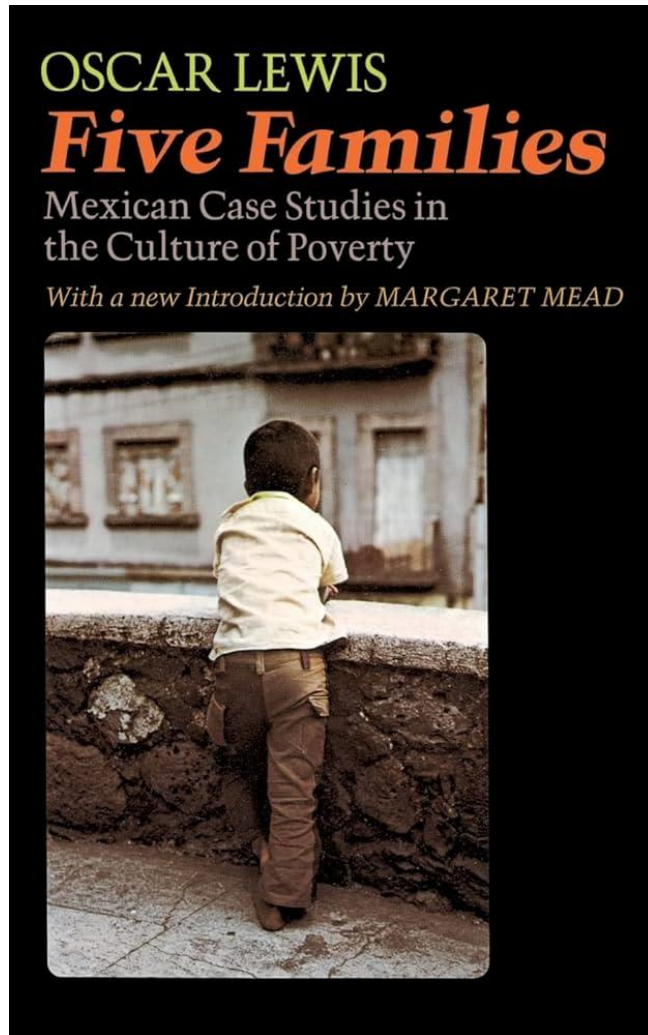
1965-68 Seebohm Report on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services

1966-69 Redcliffe-Maud Royal Commission on Local Government

1970 Local Authority Social Services Act

1972 Local Government Act

Underclass: old wine, new bottles



It was this emphasis on intergenerational continuities, **combined with the belief that deprivation was concentrated in certain problem families**, along with the resource implications for social services, that was arguably uppermost in [Sir Keith Joseph's] mind when focusing on the cycle [of deprivation].

Source: John Welshman, 'Ideology, social science, and public policy: the debate over transmitted deprivation', *Twentieth Century British History*, 16:3 (2005), 317.

Crisis, 1974 and 'the party is over'



Questions?