

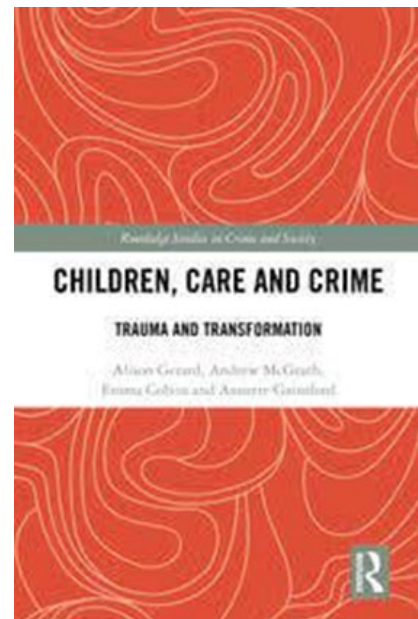
Book Review: Children, Care and Crime: Trauma and transformation

By Alison Gerard, Andrew McGrath, Emma Colvin and Annette Gainsford
Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group
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Reviewed by Suz Rock

Children, Care and Crime focuses on the often-overlooked historical structural issues underpinning the experience of children in out of home care (OOHC), and the relation these have with their involvement with the criminal justice system (CJS). Drawing on their research interviews with key stakeholders, and data from court observations and files, the authors argue that the OOHC, in its current form, plays a notably *criminogenic* role.

The book begins with the unique situation of colonised countries, specifically Australia, where the destructive practices of removing children from families and communities resulted in a phenomenon now known as the “Stolen Generations”, the impacts of which are still felt today across Indigenous communities. In fact, the book highlights that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children continue to be removed from their families at higher rates than other Australians and this, in turn, often paves the way for their encounter with the CJS. The practice of moving children from their families, due to child safety concerns, is normally described as the option of last resort; yet, it is recognised that the practice, while perceived as ‘good’ for the child, often compounds, and possibly aggravates, the suffering of the child(ren) involved.



The trauma associated with removal and the impact of adverse childhood experiences explains why practitioners should be working through a ‘trauma informed’ lens, with a holistic approach that addresses physical and mental health outcomes, often impaired by contact with the CJS. The authors discuss trauma-informed care against the background of the data they collected through interviews, file review and observations in court, teasing out the gender and ethnic considerations for practitioners. In doing so, they stress the need for a deeper insight into how adverse childhood experiences impact on behaviour and decision making, which is especially pertinent for children who have had contact with the criminal justice system. The book then provides an in-depth exploration of the residential care environment for children who have been put into OOHC, including the supports and training provided to the private sector, to which care is outsourced. Many children placed in care have additional needs and challenging behaviour, hence carers need to be trained in, and have experience of, providing ‘care’, to avoid unnecessary criminalisation as those troubling behaviours intersect with the CJS.

This leads to the issue of policing children with troubled behaviour. Historically, the police have played a central role in implementing the removal and relocation of ‘the Stolen Generations’, and this constitutes a longstanding source of fear and distrust from Indigenous communities. The authors delve into the complex relationships between police and children in OOHC, showing that the former has been used as a behaviour management tool, in turn leading to tensions between OOHC employees, police officers and the children involved. Very relevant to this issue is also the discussion on legal advice, where the authors describe how lawyers represent and advise children who have experience with OOHC. Hence, the trauma-informed approach becomes central also to the legal practice, as lawyers must operate within a culturally responsive framework, centred on the past experiences as well as the present challenges of the children they are representing, in order to get the best outcomes for them. Similar considerations apply to the Court system and its reluctance to grant bail for children in care, which obviously results in higher levels of remand: this, the authors show, has severe mental health

implications for many of these children. The authors consider, furthermore, gender-based issues, such as the labelling of young girls as ‘difficult’, which shifts the focus away from the need for specialised ‘care’.

The book’s final chapters focus on innovations from other countries and how those could be applied in the Australian context. The authors challenge current policies and procedures allegedly aimed to help, describing them as “hope tropes”, with little to offer in terms of meaningful action. A main strength of the book is the authors’ attempt to provide solutions to meet the needs of children, who have been through trauma and suffering. In doing so, they also highlight the strength and resilience of the children and workers in the OOHC system.

The book reiterates how the CJS, and the OOHC regime, can exacerbate the trauma lying at the core of these children’s challenging behaviours. The authors take readers through each stage of a care experienced child’s life: from historical origins of OOHC, care experiences, and police, lawyer and court contact. While the book uses data from NSW, the impact of colonisation and resultant inter- and transgenerational trauma has been experienced by Indigenous Australians in every Australian state and territory. In fact, this book’s findings will have important implications not just for Australia, but also for overseas countries with a history of colonialism.

About the reviewer:

Dr. Suz Rock is a lecturer in Criminology at Edith Cowan University. Her research interests include young person and family experiences of youth justice, drugs and crime, and therapeutic jurisprudence in youth justice systems. She has completed a number of projects for the Department of Justice and WA Police including rural drug use, youth burglary and perceptions of intimate image sharing.