

The Future for California



by Sigrid Bathen

A radical restructuring of care for California children, with the focus on preventing family crises before children are harmed, is suggested in a preliminary state Master Plan for Services to Children and Youth.

—The Sacramento Bee
Nov. 18, 1979

From 1989 through 1994, the number of children living in poverty in the state rose from 1.66 million to 2.36 million. In the last five years, more children have moved into impoverishment than in the previous twenty years combined. . . The consequences of current and proposed policies are not ambiguous: undernutrition, deprivation, and permanent harm for millions of children.

— Children's Advocacy Institute
'Child Poverty in California,' May 1995

Of all the stories on children I have researched and written over the years, I especially remember the story of six-year-old Danny Balfour, and the pictures the police showed me of his bruised and near-lifeless body hooked up to futile hospital life-support machines. More than 15 years after the lengthy, two-part story about the death of a child in state-licensed foster care was published in *The Sacramento Bee*, Danny's story remains as vivid as it was during those bleak fall days in 1979 when I was interviewing state and county officials, family members and foster parents and combing police and child-welfare records in the tiny, weather-beaten coastal town of Crescent City near the Oregon border.

The story is seared more prominently in my memory even than the 1974 story about the

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Children



Jonni Hill
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mentally retarded child who was badly beaten in an understaffed and poorly supervised state hospital; more than the countless interviews with juvenile criminals, including a 12-year-old who had murdered an eight-year-old, conducted in 1976 for a series on juvenile crime, which was then a mildly noted but increasingly menacing phenomenon. More than the horrific stories of child abuse researched for speeches by state Attorney General John Van de Kamp, for whom I worked as press secretary during his first term in 1983-87. More than the wrenching accounts of chronically hungry children and their parents in California's agriculturally rich Central Valley for a study I helped write for the California Rural Legal Assistance Foundation in 1991.

Perhaps it was the sheer brutality of the Balfour boy's death, the stark poverty of the house where he lived his final days or the bizarre incompetence, paralysis even, of government agencies charged with protecting him; but Danny's story has always stuck in my mind as one of the worst examples, among many, in California's sorry history of services to children—services which, by all accounts, are getting worse, progressively more poorly funded and less accountable either to taxpayers or the children and families they are designed to help. In a mad rush to punish absent, drug-addicted or simply irresponsible adults, policy-makers are punishing the children instead.

The history is instructive. State officials under then-Governor Jerry Brown were talking a lot in those days about the need to improve children's services in California, much as the administration of Governor Pete Wilson did in his first term and now as he aims for the White House. I used Wilson's 1990 inaugural speech as an exercise for journalism students in classes at California State University, Sacramento — as their eyes glazed over, I told them to pretend they were there and write a *concise* story on this massive tome. I suggested they focus on the prevention theme of the speech, and its emphasis on children, which I found refreshingly newsworthy.

Four years have passed, and Wilson, much like Jerry Brown before him, is still talking about reforming children's services, mainly the appalling state of California education, but not much has changed. The future for children in Cali-

formia has, in fact, become increasingly bleak as report after report is issued by highly respected academic and advocacy groups, detailing the grim, deprived, impoverished, crime-ridden lives of California children in the '90s and beyond.

Just last month, on May 9th, the Children's Advocacy Institute announced an early release of the first chapter of its 1995-96 California Children's Budget, sounding yet another alarm about funding priorities in a state where more children live in poverty than at any time in California's history. Citing "irresponsible and unconscionable choices made over the past five years by public officials," the institute urged a major realignment in the way state and federal officials approach and fund child welfare, nutrition and protection — including serious parenting education and family planning to prevent teen pregnancy, improved child support collection and aggressive job training. "The major panacea bafflingly advanced is the deprivation of children," the institute concluded, "and it is the one alternative which categorically is not acceptable."

More than 15 years ago, when the Danny Balfour stories appeared in *The Bee*, major reform of the foster-care system was being touted and public hearings held on a state "Master Plan for Services to Children and Youth." Like much of the rhetoric that swirls around state government, regardless of the party in power, the Brown administration pledge proved to be as empty as Wilson's lofty goals in 1990, giving serious pause to any futurist view of change in the coming millennium.

I learned about the Danny Balfour case from a high-level state official who could have been fired for telling me



about it. These things were best kept quiet, the reasoning went. That official decided to put his own outrage and the public good above bureaucratic silence, and no one to this day, even my trusting and extremely savvy editor, knows that individual's identity.

Danny Balfour was placed in unlicensed foster care in a dingy house in Crescent City across the street from the very licensing agency — the Del Norte County Welfare Department — that was bound by law to protect him. He was later beaten to death by his foster father, who was an ex-felon at the time Danny was placed with him and his wife, who was pregnant and receiving AFDC. Eugene Diaz, who was later convicted of Danny's murder, had not lied

about his ex-felon status on the foster parent application, and Danny and one of his older brothers were placed in the home before a licensing investigation was done — partly on the recommendation of the boys' mother. The family history was predictably sordid, including abuse, alcoholism, a father in prison for sexually abusing two of Danny's half-brothers. It was an horrific tale, to some extent a worst-case scenario, but also fairly typical of the hopelessly scattered approach to children's services in California and throughout the nation in 1979, when it was virtually impossible to get a precise number from bureaucrats at any level on even the *number* of foster homes where the child had been placed, at considerable public expense and with quite obvious failure:

"Danny Balfour was a foster child, a veteran of at least seven and perhaps 13 foster homes, depending on whose estimate is accepted, but his life ended in the last one. He died much as he had lived — abused, battered, neglected,

ignored, passed around this rugged north coastal town like a slab of lumber or fish, mainstays of the community's tenuous economy.

"He turned six on August 28, 1979. He died in a hospital on September 21 of massive head injuries. . .

"As near as the police can tell, he was beaten to death sometime on the afternoon of Sept. 18, 1979, in the green frame house where he was placed by the welfare department some two months before. Records at Crescent City's Seaside Hospital indicate he was brought to the emergency room at 8:25 PM, in an ambulance summoned by his foster father." (*The Sacramento Bee*, Nov. 14, 1979)

One of the ironies in the Balfour story is that Crescent City has since received a major economic infusion from the Pelican Bay State Prison, the state-of-the-art maximum-security facility for violent offenders. Before writing extensively about children's issues, including the burgeoning juvenile crime problem in California, I had long covered criminal justice and prison issues, and I find it an irony of sorts that the economically distressed community where Danny Balfour was ignored and died is now thriving because of a high-tech prison — an enormously expensive high-tech prison with its own set of problems, not the least of which is the huge drain on the state budget for incarceration.

While no one, certainly not politicians, wants to take on the issue of prisons versus schools and children's services, the fact is that California's correctional budget is draining massive quantities of scarce state dollars from programs that otherwise might be better used for schools and food programs for California's increasingly hungry children, as well as juvenile crime prevention efforts of proven success and considerably less cost. I say *might* because the bureaucracy has an uncanny knack for screwing up the delivery of critical funds to needed places, even when the will is there and the funds are available.

One "reform" pushed through by the Brown administration in response to a series of scandals, many involving children's issues, in the old state Department of Health, was to invoke that timeworn bureaucratic adage — "when in doubt, reorganize!" — and break up the enormous department into smaller units. And, while the plan in theory had

merit, in reality questionable administrative practices were simply transferred to smaller departments, resulting in little substantive change. Licensing of child-care and foster-care facilities, for example, is now handled by the Department of Social Services, often under contract with the counties (as was the case in Del Norte County in 1979), a realignment that has not appreciably improved the delivery of services.

There are far more children in need of foster care than places to put them, which means many will simply remain in abusive or neglectful home situations. In a damning report with no particular surprises for child abuse experts, the U.S. Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect in April said violence against young children in the United States has reached epidemic proportions. At the same time, as part of its welfare reform bill, the House of



Representatives earlier this year voted to turn over 23 federal child abuse prevention, foster care and adoption programs to the states, while cutting funding by \$1.6 billion over five years.

Many small family day care homes in California — the preferred form of child care over center-based care — are unlicensed, and, like child protective service workers, inspectors for child care facilities are overloaded with cases. Investigations of questionable facilities of all types are bogged

down by tedious administrative and legal procedures. Child care slots for low-income parents, many of them single parents, are utterly inadequate, and grim child care experts say there is a huge increase in the phenomenon of the "latchkey kid," with all of the attendant social and potential criminal problems that can create. Among at least three million school-age children in California, according to estimates by the state Assembly Office of Research, approximately 620,000 children aged six to 14 are "presently unsupervised before or after school."

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"Some of these children are left with young siblings," reported the Children's Advocacy Institute in its 1994-95 Children's Budget. "Others fend for themselves in dangerous neighborhoods, and an alarming number are 'latchkeyed' — that is, locked in the home."

Or unlocked.

"One of the hardest things to accept is that we have no spaces," says Charlene Morita, director of early childhood education for the San Juan Unified School District in Sacramento, where the waiting list for school-based child care for low-income families exceeds 600 children. "We see the children watching us through the fence."

Many child-care experts are troubled by what they see as a tacit social acceptance of the latchkey child as an unfortunate necessity, deterring efforts to provide adequate, safe child care for all who need it. "The latchkey problem is very serious," says longtime children's advocate Pat Dorman, publisher of the venerable newsletter on children's issues, *On the Capitol Doorstep*. "It's becoming

'accepted' that young children can stay alone at home."

When it comes down to the simplistic choice between locking up criminals versus spending money on kids, Californians' justifiably terrible fear of escalating crime and violence always wins out. It's a no-win situation, budget writers and politicians know. Forward-looking law enforcement officials like Sacramento County Sheriff Glen Craig, who is a tough conservative on crime issues but knows crime must be stopped at its source — in the home and schools — are quietly attempting to plug the gushing holes in the dike by doing *both* juvenile prevention and lockup.

"Every politician who is running for office has a solution for the crime problem," Craig said in a recent interview with *Sacramento Magazine*. "But all of them are throwing darts. They're attacking only a small part of the total problem. They're doing it piecemeal and based on emotion. I swear I get so frustrated that we can't get the attention of anybody to do anything until it becomes a major complication."

Craig, who was a longtime state

law-enforcement administrator before he ran for sheriff, is among a growing group of "top cops" who back strong programs for juvenile crime intervention. And they all recommend it start early, in elementary school, maybe even preschool, definitely in the home. Since they see the end-result of policies that fail to deal with the root causes of crime, and while they do not advocate locking up fewer criminals, they know that prison space is finite, that crime is increasingly, and chillingly, a children's act, and that time is running out.

In fact, as a reporter who has covered both ends of the criminal justice spectrum, from children's programs to violent adult offenders, I find one bright light on the dim programmatic horizon, and that is the increasing cooperation between educators, children's service administrators and law enforcement. Juvenile diversion programs are flourishing in communities and schools, often staffed by volunteers from the community and local businesses, and many law enforcement agencies, including Craig's, have started mentor/tutor programs to help kids stay in

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school and avoid drugs and other criminal activity — the “easy” money of crime being an attractive option for the increasing numbers of children whose families, if they have families, live on the economic and social edge.

When I was covering K-12 education for *The Bee* in the late '70s and early '80s, and later, when I was press secretary to former State Superintendent of Public Instruction Wilson Riles in 1982, I was often baffled by the dearth of consistent communication between educators and law enforcement officials, the lack of “interfacing,” as the bureaucrats like to say, between repeated foster-care placement and later criminal behavior. By the time I was working for California’s “top cop” in the Attorney General’s Office in the mid-’80s, more open communication between the two groups had begun. Now, in the '90s, there is a plethora of programs involving cops and judges, business and communities, and the schools. It’s one small but significant move in the direction of taking decisive action to halt the violence and alienation affecting children and their families in California.



An important aspect of this approach, say juvenile crime diversion workers, is for middle-class volunteers to suspend judgment — and to learn something — about the conditions faced in neighborhoods, homes and schools by young people whose “family” often becomes a gang simply by virtue of the fact that nobody else is around or seems to care. “Gangs will tell you that they will love you and they will die for you,” one community activist who works with young people told me in a recent interview for an article on diversion

programs. And he used a chilling anecdote from a Detroit gang member who spoke at a conference on juvenile crime:

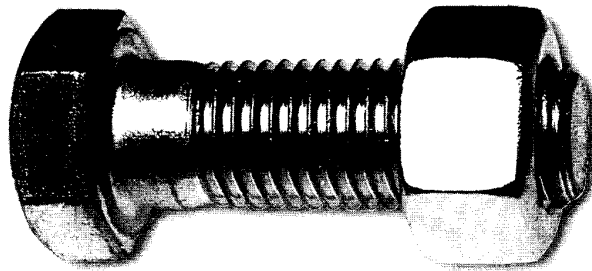
“He asked the kids how many of their parents told them that they love them, and half the hands went up. He asked them how many of their parents would die for them, and no hands went up.”

Another youth worker interviewed for that story — who works with kids convicted of crimes and has significantly lowered their rate of return to the justice system — told the story of a kid whose travel-agent parents would regularly leave him for several days in his upper-middle-class suburban home with \$100 and plenty of videos for their wide-screen TV. He was arrested for stealing.

That youth worker also said he avoids the cynicism and defeat of many adults in his field because “I see kids changing. I can see them changing in front of me. I can see a very sweet, young child who was never given the opportunity to be a kid.”

Kids like Danny Balfour, who would have been 22 this August 28. 🏠

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