
MEDIA REVIEWS

Wounded Innocents: The Real Victims of the War Against Child Abuse. By Richard Wexler. Buffalo, NY: Prometheus, 1990, 369 pp., \$21.95.

The author, a reporter, sets out to chronicle the shortcomings of the child welfare system in the United States. He blames the problems with the system on people whom he calls "the child savers." Although he correctly identifies some serious problems with child welfare service delivery and describes some clear situations of malpractice, his argument is fundamentally flawed. Furthermore, the book is rife with unsupported generalizations, full of distortions of facts and research, and calculated to enflame, rather than inform, the debate about child welfare intervention. Because of space limitations, I cannot address all of these deficiencies and will focus primarily on the problems with his argument.

According to Wexler, among the institutional abuses undertaken or supported by child savers are the following: lying and distorting information about the actual incidence and nature of child maltreatment; expanding the definition of child maltreatment so that any family can be found abusive or neglectful; obscuring the relationship between child maltreatment and poverty; perpetrating traumatic and invasive investigations of innocent families for child maltreatment; destroying families and indeed preferring placement of children to working with families; engaging in coercive intervention without any regard for due process; removing children from their families merely because the families are poor; declaring that maltreating parents are mentally ill and require therapy, when all they need are concrete services; engaging in coercive and relentless interrogations of children of whom abuse, particularly sexual abuse, is alleged, so that the children falsely affirm abuse; creating in children unnecessary fear of adults through child maltreatment prevention programs; supporting strip searches of children alleged to have been maltreated; removing children from their homes when no maltreatment has occurred; allowing children to be abused and killed in foster care; tolerating deplorable conditions in foster homes and institutional placements; shunting children from home to home in foster care; allowing children to languish in foster care rather than being either returned home or adopted; and generally supporting a system in which child protection workers are poorly trained, poorly paid, have extraordinarily high caseloads, and are taught that the most important aspect of their job is protecting the agency.

Wexler poses a series of remedies for the appalling state of affairs that he says has been fostered by the child savers. Foremost among these is the implementation of the Homebuilders Model, a short-term, intensive, family-based intervention that is dem-

onstrated to be effective in preventing child placement. His other remedies are taken primarily from the work of Michael Wald. Most of these are sound suggestions that have already been implemented in some states or attempted on an experimental basis.

Wexler's rhetoric against these child savers deserves quoting because it illustrates the tone of the book. "In the 1990s, America faces an invasion of latter-day child savers. They are destroying children in order to save them." (p. 28) "Running through much of modern child saving, there is an undercurrent of hostility toward the very idea that families are a unit of societal organization." (p. 72) "With no standards and no training, workers look for something obvious to get a hold of. This may explain child savers' near obsession with whether a house is messy." (p. 117) "People who go into child saving tend to crave power over others." . . . "The absolute power of child savers has bred self-righteousness and arrogance." (p. 131) "Of course, the child savers have a solution for all of this. Since working with families is anathema to them, they come up with an answer that's simple, obvious, and wrong. . . . 'bring back the orphanage'." (p. 183)

Altogether, these child savers sound like a despicable lot. The reader anticipates a precise definition of who they are, but it is never provided. Moreover, the definition seems to shift somewhat from chapter to chapter. Nevertheless, during the course of the book, the reader gathers that Wexler is referring to professionals who work for child welfare agencies — in child protection, foster care, and adoption, both in public and private agencies. Also, a diverse group of professionals with varied perspectives on child welfare are identified as child savers. These include Anne Cohn, Deborah Daro, Vincent Fontana, Richard Bourne, David Chadwick, Frederick Green, Norman Polansky, Edwin Zigler, Roland Summit, Henry Kempe, Ray Helfer, Lucy Berliner, and Kee MacFarlane. The reader may be taken aback by Wexler's views of these people because they have dedicated their professional lives to helping children. Also, researchers Diana Russell, David Finkelhor, Murray Straus, and Richard Gelles are called sympathetic to child savers or to the child saver camp.

When I reached page 137, I discovered that I am a child saver as well, even though I have written fairly extensively, criticizing the child welfare system (Faller, 1981, 1984, 1985, 1991) and making some of the same points that Wexler does, but without the venom. Wexler misspells my name and lists me as one of the professionals asserting that children never lie. I have never said or written this, but this sort of distortion is characteristic of how he uses statements and the written work of professionals throughout the book.

His comments about me are illustrative of one of the fundamental weaknesses of his argument. None of the persons whom he describes as child savers are absolute supporters of the child welfare system. The professionals whom he denigrates are generally more thoughtfully involved than he in identifying the problems of the child welfare system and in attempting to address them. However, he occasionally notes that some child savers are not categorical supporters of the current system. For instance, he acknowledges one of several concerns that David Finkelhor has raised about child welfare service delivery, and he mentions Gelles's criticism of attempts to explain child abuse relying solely on psychological theories.

A second flaw in his argument is his ascription of opposition by the persons he calls child savers to family preservation, specifically the Homebuilders Model. This is a spurious assertion. Homebuilders has been developed and supported by child welfare agencies across the country — that is, by the child savers. Perhaps he was not aware that Peter Forsythe, who is responsible for substantial funding and technical assistance for Homebuilders in his position with the Clark Foundation, has the child saver taint. Before joining the Clark Foundation, Forsythe was Director of the Office of Children and Youth Services in the State of Michigan, the state public child welfare agency. Wexler's assertion that there are two camps, the child saver and the family preservation, is false.

If Wexler had considered the Homebuilders Model more closely, he might have discovered that, in most respects, it is what Protective Services was intended to be, not its antithesis. Protective Services is supposed to provide short-term, home-based intervention, supportive of families. Workers are to rely on an array of services, including day care, transportation, parent aides, public health nurses and other medical services, parenting classes, treatment, and assistance in obtaining financial benefits (Faller, 1981). Contrary to Wexler's assertion, therapy is not the preferred intervention. Moreover, Protective Services is structured to provide in-home services and to remove children during attempts to change the family situation only when they are not safe. These strategies are the same as those of Homebuilders. Where Homebuilders and Protective Services differ is that Protective Services is also responsible for investigation of the report of maltreatment; Protective Services involvement is usually of a little longer duration (from 2 months to 2 years, rather than 4 weeks to 6 months) and their caseloads are larger.

Caseload size brings me to my final point regarding flaws in Wexler's argument. He scapegoats people whom he calls child savers rather than appreciating that most of the problems in the child welfare system are caused by inadequate resources, not by apologists for an evil system and malpractitioners.

Wexler rightly points out that the United States has the most ungenerous social welfare system of the developed countries, but then he sidesteps this very important issue. Not only have social welfare benefits always been low, but the situation has gotten dramatically worse in the last 15 years. The demise of our parsimonious social welfare system began with President Carter's cutting of the AFDC program, but the major dismantling occurred under the Reagan administration. This included additional cuts of the AFDC program (so that benefits are now at about 60% of the poverty level), cuts in food stamps, changes in Medicaid eligibility, and an undermining of the low-income housing program, creating a new social problem, homelessness. Mental health services and child welfare services also suffered considerably.

Consequences of the depleted social welfare system are pervasive. Further, their impact on child welfare service delivery was exacerbated because they coincided with child protection legislation, which requires a wider range of professionals to report suspected maltreatment, and the designation of maltreatment other than physical abuse as reportable. These legislative changes have led to a progressive increase in the number of child maltreatment reports.

Examples of the impact of cuts in social welfare with regard to child welfare include the following. Families are not able to adequately provide for their children, which may result in their being referred to child protective services; economic stress increases the risk for child abuse and neglect; and child welfare workers cannot rely on concrete resources from the social welfare system in their intervention. The following are some of the resources that are in short supply: low-income housing and housing subsidies, financial assistance (including funds to prevent utility shut-offs, rental payments to prevent eviction, and money for other emergency needs), day care, prenatal and well-child care, physicians who will take Medicaid, family support programs, and food stamps. Underfunding of the child welfare system alone has resulted in declassification of positions (allowing positions to be filled by persons without master's degrees in social work), low salaries, high caseloads in some localities, lack of sufficient in-service training, and the inadequacy of services specifically tailored to maltreating families. These include parent aides, multidisciplinary teams, parenting classes, and specialized therapy, such as that for sexually abusive families. Also, it has meant inadequate reimbursement and supportive services for foster parents, resulting in insufficient numbers of qualified foster parents, overcrowding in foster care, and children in inappropriate placements. Comparable negative effects are found in institutional placements, such as group homes, residential treatment facilities, and psychiatric hospitals.

Not all of the problems in the child welfare system would be remedied by adequate funding for social and child welfare, but without resources, substantial change cannot occur. Allocation of sufficient resources requires a change in priorities on the part of the public and the lawmakers, not on the part of the people whom Wexler calls the child savers.

By using material from a large number of sources, Wexler writes a book that masquerades as a serious exploration of the problems in the child welfare system. Unfortunately, in fact, Wexler does precisely what he criticizes other journalists for; he writes a book that is sensationalistic rather than serious.

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