

Clifford K. Dorne (1997) Child maltreatment: A primer in history, public policy, and research, Harrow and Heston, Publishers, Albany, NY, ISBN 911 577 432

This is a revised edition of the earlier book, *Crimes against children*, published in 1989. The preface indicates that the book is intended 'to serve as a blueprint for the development of university-level courses on child maltreatment' and to 'reflect the multidisciplinary aspects of child maltreatment in their public policy contexts' (p xi). It is organised to show the 'general historical evolution of the 'official' responses to child maltreatment' and does this with a focus on the US system. It may be useful to students who wish to study the US system and its development with special attention to the medicalisation of the response but it is limited to this rather than a general overview, including research and developments from other common law countries such as England, Scotland, Wales, and Australia.

While it may be revised, it relies heavily on material published in the 1980s rather than more recent publications and it is rather superficial and dated in its discussion of various areas. Even in relation to the area where it is strongest – the history and the development of various organisations and institutions in US – it misses some very important reports and developments. For example, there is no mention of the 1990 report by US Advisory Board on Child Abuse and Neglect, *Critical Steps in Response to a National Emergency*. This report outlined the many problems with the child protection system in the US in relation to the investigation of child abuse and neglect, and the way children were treated within that system and concluded that the system was in crisis and that the situation represented 'a national emergency'. This then led to various attempts to introduce a more proactive and integrative approach, and while this is recognised, it receives scant reference, and gains little from much of the overseas work on inter-agency collaboration. The references to the 'large body of literature in child maltreatment prevention' (p 165) do not include any publications beyond 1988, after which there was a massive explosion of work in this field. Similarly, there have been a number of influential reviews beyond the comprehensive review of Helfer (1982) referred to by Dorne, including influential reviews by Cichetti, Belsky and Garbarino.

Dorne does raise some interesting questions about why some cases of child maltreatment, especially child sexual assault, are treated as crimes and are dealt with in the criminal justice system while others are managed within the child welfare system. However, his explanation in terms of the 'medicalisation' of child maltreatment, and his brief analysis of the response to crimes committed by people outside the family, are ultimately unsatisfactory. He fails to come to grips with the debate concerning the issues in relation to child sexual assault, and other forms of maltreatment. Additionally, Dorne does not include any reference to the differences in prevention in relation to child sexual assault and the response to the more recently recognised problem of children and adolescents who sexually abuse other children and adolescents.

One of the dangers of a book which tries to cover a very broad field is that it may be superficial in its discussion of quite complex issues within particular areas. Unfortunately, this is the case with this book. Two examples will suffice. First, in relation to the controversial and complex area of false allegations of child sexual assault in divorce matters, the literature that Dorne cites is quite limited and selective, and only skims the surface of the debate. The two articles he refers to do not include quite large scale studies in both the UK and the US on the incidence of child sexual assault allegations in the context of disputes about custody or residence relation. For example, McIntosh and Prinz's (1993) findings did not support the contention that sexual abuse allegations are commonplace in child custody disputes since they occurred in only 2% of cases in which custody or access was contested, and in only 0.8% of the cases overall. Similarly, Anthony and Watkeys (1991) investigated all referrals received by child health, social services, and police of suspected child sexual abuse over several years in a local authority area of Wales. They found that 6 per cent of the false and malicious cases were by adults involved in custody disputes, and only 2 per cent were direct referrals from children (Anthony & Watkeys 1991).

Similarly, Dorne's treatment of the issue of child witnesses is somewhat short on data and selective in its coverage. In relation to the changes in procedures to accommodate child witnesses, he cautions against these changes (pp 106-7). In relation to the changes in competency requirements for child witnesses, Dorne says that: '[t]his may well be a dangerous trend, increasing the likelihood of convictions for innocent defendants in cases involving sexual abuse allegations' (p 105). While there are certainly some notorious cases like that of Kelly Michaels' conviction and appeal, this had less to do with these changes than with the impropriety of the interviewing process. What evidence there is in relation to conviction rates points to a falling conviction rate with concerns about the 'pointlessness' of involving young children in the criminal justice system when the chances of a conviction are so slim.

In summary, while this revised edition may be useful reading for students interested in the US system, it does not provide a broad up-to-date overview of the area for students and other readers looking for a primer on child maltreatment, public policy and related research beyond this system.

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References

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- McIntosh, JA & Prinz, RJ (1993) 'The incidence of alleged sexual abuse in 603 family court cases', *Law & Human Behaviour*, vol 17, pp 95-101.