

## Book review

**Abrams, L.S. and Anderson-Nathe, B. (2013). *Compassionate confinement: A year in the life of unit C*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press. 188pp., ISBN 978-0-8135-5412-9, \$23.95.**

I have to admit that I approached this review with some prejudices. When working at the University of Strathclyde, I took part in the Social Work Department's long-standing exchange with the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. On one of my trips there I asked to visit a juvenile justice facility. The request itself took people a bit by surprise for juvenile justice was not really considered to be part of social work but was located firmly within a criminal justice paradigm. The memory of the visit remains with me; there was certainly confinement but little evidence of compassion. Kids, often untried, were held in cells off a main hallway and slopped out in metal buckets. This experience more than any other highlighted to me the fact that America had not and continues not to ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Having read this book, I now realise that it was probably a detention centre I visited. There are other treatment centres that are more progressive in their thinking and perhaps bear slightly more direct comparison with residential facilities here in Scotland. The book provides a rich picture of one such centre, 'Wildwood House', based upon an ethnographic study by two academics who spent 16 months undertaking their research. Given the sheer amount of data they must have gathered in such a time, the result is a remarkably rich yet concise, lucid and insightful description and analysis of the facility.

While there may be some similarities in approach between Wildwood House and residential facilities here there are also significant differences. Wildwood housed 75 residents looked after by eight to ten full-time staff. Most of the staff were white; most of the residents from a range of ethnic backgrounds. The picture on the front cover suggests large dormitories with bunk-beds, perhaps housing around ten to a dozen boys. In that sense, the centre was more akin to what residential schools were like here perhaps forty years ago.

The book begins with an historical overview of provision for and attitudes towards young people who offend. One of the facts that always strikes me is how, in a context of neoliberal penalty and despite a rhetoric of improvement, we have actually gone backwards in respect of societies' thinking on how to respond to such young people. Wildwood House opened around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century when the link between delinquency and dependency was well understood and the focus was on rehabilitation. The period from the 1920s to 60s was characterised by medicalised concerns around mental hygiene and eugenics (as in fact was much otherwise progressive social thinking of the time) still within a broadly rehabilitative paradigm. The 1960s and '70s witnessed a brief period of concern for children's rights and de-institutionalisation before the election of Reagan as President in 1980 (and Thatcher in the UK) saw a marked shift in thinking

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towards punishment. This trend, until recently, continued even though youth crime began to fall markedly.

Chapter Three examines the regime in Wildwood House addressing the central question of how treatment is woven in with involuntary confinement. What is apparent is how inadequately understood or articulated the premises of treatment actually were. A central narrative existed of looking to family problems as being at the root of boys' offending. Running alongside this was another discourse of boys' exhibiting patterns of 'criminal thinking', which needed to be challenged. These seeming treatment models co-existed with a points system. Boys could progress through levels and gain privileges by 'doing the work' of acknowledging family problems or distorted thinking. The extent to which they engaged in any meaningful sense in the treatment regime is explored in a subsequent chapter.

Chapter Four focuses on how gender was played out at Wildwood, recognising, as other writers on residential care have, that this is a substantially under-theorised aspect of our understanding of the field. The need to address questions of gender becomes all the more important given the fact that several of the young men in the study were already fathers, with all that entailed for their identities. The regime itself gave out conflicting messages, on the one hand encouraging boys to show their feelings while at another level modelling some fairly traditional male traits around competition and control.

The next chapter asks what is perhaps the 64,000 dollar question: can overtly correctional facilities effect lasting identity or even behavioural change? The answer, unsurprisingly, is not clear. In some cases boys did seem to act on their desires to take their lives in more positive directions, although even in such cases it was difficult to establish the link between the treatment regime and subsequent patterns of behaviour. In other cases, the experience in Wildwood House merely washed off boys once they had left. The next chapter investigates the 'wash-out effect' whereby former residents of correctional facilities revert to previous patterns of behaviour on release. In the small sample of cases studied here the findings were somewhat nuanced; some boys did seem to get their lives back on track but this was largely independent of their experience in Wildwood. In fact, some of those who engaged at a very superficial level with the treatment regime, those who 'faked it', actually seemed to do better on release than those who conformed.

All of this could be experienced as something of a counsel of despair for those of us who spent long years in direct practice and can recognise only too readily the shortcomings of our own past and indeed others' current practice. Specific features of the system also rang bells; the way in which many staff use brief experience of residential care work as a stepping stone to jobs in other parts of the system, in this case, probation. What struck me most was just how incoherent the regime was. Boys were placed, for instance, for between 4-6 months with no rationale for this timeframe other than cost. What might be achieved in such a short time was not really considered and in fact it may be that it was merely an expensive way of doing little of any great import in boys' lives. For all of that, the authors were not overly critical of the facility itself; they understand the need to do something for and with such youth. The reality is that facilities such as Wildwood are products of dysfunctional and reactive political understandings of how best to respond to

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youth at risk. Current responses are not rooted in any deeper set of values; it is hard to be compassionate in a culture of confinement.

Dr Mark Smith

University of Edinburgh

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