

Absconding

1844 –

Details

Absconding is a term used to describe the act of running away or escaping from an institution, foster home or other place of care. The report of the 2004 Senate “Forgotten Australians” inquiry stated that ‘absconding was a widely reported practice’ in children’s institutions around Australia.

Various child welfare laws around Australia made absconding or running away an offence. Punishment for running away could include whipping or a bread and water diet. Adults who helped absconders could also be penalised. Children who absconded from an orphanage or foster care placement could be transferred to a reformatory as punishment and children absconding from a reformatory could receive an extended sentence.

On child welfare records, absconding was often abbreviated to ‘ABS’.

Analysis of the Victorian *Police Gazette* undertaken by the Care Leavers Australasia Network (CLAN) found that 1528 children in a 9 year period were reported as having absconded from institutions in Victoria. (This figure only represents children whose absconding was reported to the police and published in the Gazette. Many more children were captured and returned before a notice could be published.) CLAN’s research shows a correlation between Homes with high absconding rates and testimony from survivors about endemic child abuse in the same institutions.

Giving evidence to the Victorian Parliament’s Inquiry into the handling of child abuse by religious and other organisations in 2012, Leonie Sheedy from CLAN presented this research about absconding to the Committee:

We strongly suggest that many of these child absconders were running away from child rape, sexual and other forms of criminal assault; for many, it was a cry from the heart.

What did the police do with absconders when they caught them? They simply returned them to their abusers, so the cry from the heart was never heard. There are many care leavers’ accounts telling the police of their abuse, but the police saw their job as simply to take these children back to the home, not to listen to allegations of abuse. They did not ask questions of the children, they did not ask why they were running away, they did not inquire as to their wellbeing, and they did not call in the welfare department. They simply returned these children back into the hands of their abusers, no questions asked.

Many Care Leavers have spoken about their absconding, and never being asked by authorities what they were running away from. One Care Leaver spoke to the Senate Committee in February 2004:

... the boys used to abscond or run away from the orphanages and the police would capture them. The police would then give them a hiding and deliver them back to the home. The Salvation Army officers in the home would then give the boys a hiding. That is the way it was. The police knew what was going on up

there, but they did absolutely nothing

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More info

Resources

- Ackland, John W, *Institutional Reactions to Absconding*, The British Journal of Social Work, 1981

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