

## Editorial

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This is now the third SJRCC editorial I have written during the COVID-19 pandemic. Since the last issue, several vaccines have received approval from regulatory authorities and the news on their efficacy is very good. The World Health Organization reports (18 February 2021) that seven vaccines are being deployed, and more than 200 vaccines are in development, more than 60 of which are at clinical research stages. Wealthier countries are farther along in vaccine roll-out, with Israel and the UK out in front. The real challenge is to ensure equitable distribution on a world scale. The WHO has developed the COVAX Facility as a mechanism for pooling vaccine procurement and distribution to middle and low-income countries.

Children are not priority candidates for receiving the vaccine, because the evidence is that fewer children get sick with COVID-19 compared to adults, though they can spread the virus, including asymptomatic spread. Children and young people, however, have been major casualties of the pandemic in other ways. Schooling has been significantly affected in most countries. School and college education has variously moved online, but access to digital learning is sharply differentiated by country and by level of family income. According to UNICEF, only 33 per cent of children and young people globally have internet access at home, with 87 per cent coverage in high-income countries, compared to six per cent in low-income countries.

During the crisis, there has been a growing body of research aimed at better understanding the real lives of children, young people and their families, and how these are being affected by the current circumstances.

For example, research carried out by CELCIS and the University of Edinburgh examined digital inclusion and exclusion on young people who had left care in Scotland during the pandemic. The researchers found challenges including lack of hardware and access to stable broadband or Wi-Fi as well as gaps in digital confidence and literacy. The researchers point out that digital exclusion is a human rights issue, with consequences for mental health, educational and employment opportunities, and access to vital support.

Towards the end of 2020 the Scottish Government published a summary of Scottish and UK evidence on the impact of COVID-19 on wellbeing of children and young people. Food poverty, and increased anxiety and isolation were consistent findings across the studies reported.

Also in Scotland, 5 February saw the one-year anniversary of the publication of the conclusions of the Independent Care Review, and the appointment of members of an Oversight Board responsible for ensuring that Scotland 'keeps the promise' to improve its care system for children and young people. During 2020, 'The Promise' team distilled these conclusions into reports on particular aspects of the care system and the vision on what needs to change. For residential care this is summarised as follows (The Promise, 2020, p. 2).

- Residential Homes and Schools must prioritise the quality of relationships that children experience in residential settings.
- Staff must be recruited on the basis of their values rather than educational levels.
- Children must not be further stigmatised, and any rules that do so must end.
- Scotland must strive to become a nation that does not restrain its children.
- The workforce must be supported to ensure a caring, relational and trauma-informed response to challenging behaviour.
- Decision making processes must involve children and prioritise their rights and needs.

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- Scotland must stop the criminalisation of care experienced children by supporting the workforce to behave and treat children in a way that is relational rather than procedural and process driven.
  - The importance of relationships cannot be overstated – Scotland must nurture and sustain positive relationships for care experienced children.

In January 2021 the Secretary of State for Education for England announced an independent review of children's social care. The terms of reference include examination of early years help, child protection, fostering and kinship care, and residential care homes, as well as the family support measures needed to prevent children having to enter care.

Back in Scotland, a Bill to incorporate the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child into Scots Law is progressing through the Parliamentary process. The office of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland has provided very accessible information about the Bill, including the advantages of legal incorporation, on its website.

In Ireland, the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes published its final report in January. This very substantial report describes in shocking detail the distressing history of 14 mother and baby homes and four county homes for young women who became pregnant outside marriage. Around 56,000 mothers, aged from 12 to the 40s (80 per cent were aged 18-29), and 57,000 children were put by their families into homes run by religious societies because of the stigma of illegitimacy, the largest numbers during the 1960s and early 1970s. A further 25,000 mothers and a larger number of children placed in the county homes, mostly pre-1960, were not investigated. A very high proportion (15 per cent) of children born in the institutions died, a rate which was much higher (40 per cent) in the 1930s and 1940s. The Commission notes that what was 'disquieting' was that the high mortality rate was known to the authorities. The report outlines in detail the conditions of the individual institutions, pieced together from official records and the testimonies of witnesses, as well as the 'boarding out' of children in foster homes and the process of adoption as it changed over time.

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## Spring 2021 issue

We will publish two issues in 2021, in spring and autumn. The autumn issue will seek articles on the theme of SIRCC Online (date to be announced), and that theme will be circulated soon. During the year we will also highlight articles from our substantial archive which now extends to almost 20 years of publication.

The current issue includes four original research papers and five shorter articles. The longer research papers are peer-reviewed by at least two members of the editorial advisory board, while shorter articles are reviewed by one member.

Philip Teer of Children's Community Services in Belfast has reviewed the literature on the role of informal networks in young people transitioning from care, concluding that research highlights the emerging importance of interdependent living programmes to complement traditional independent living programmes and the important role relationships have for wellbeing and improving life outcomes for care leavers. Rosie Urquhart-Stewart and Nicola Wylie, psychologists at NHS Fife, report on their research to elucidate how young people and the workforce experience labels in a secure and residential service. Their study which used grounded theory and ethnographic methods found that 'young people and the adults working to support them perceive that much of the everyday language they experience are labels which they often regard as negative and not conducive to empowerment'. Yesha Bhagat and Barbara O'Reilly of the Institute of Integrated Systemic Therapy report on their case study research of the feelings of residential managers on children leaving homes, something they found was not much reflected on. Tara Collins and colleagues from the School of Child and Youth Care at Ryerson University, Canada report on child rights education for young people involved in child welfare services, concluding that this 'has been underutilised in its capacity to improve the way child welfare services generally and residential services in particular are delivered'.

The first short article, by Paul Sullivan of CELCIS, explains how 'Musicares' is helping to heal trauma and support the development of supportive relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic. Phillip Mendes of the Department of Social Work at Monash University, Australia considers the policy context and outcomes of

support beyond care in the State of Victoria, Australia. Claire Lightowler of Children and Youth Centre for Justice at the University of Strathclyde, with Bruce Adamson and Maria Galli of the office of the Children and Young People's Commissioner Scotland, reflect on why a high proportion of children who have not been tried or have not been convicted are deprived of their liberty in Scotland. Paul Sullivan of CELCIS and Beth-Anne Logan, chair of the secure care advisory group, STARR, describe the national standards for supporting children and young people in secure care in Scotland. Finally, Alexandra Giordano, social work students and residential worker with Glasgow City Council, considers messages from the literature on risk assessment toolkits and intervention strategies that are helpful for those working directly with looked after children.

The issue ends with a review by me of Madeleine Bunting's book, 'Labours of Love: The Crisis of Care' (Granta, 2020). Madeleine gave the 18th Kilbrandon Lecture at the University of Strathclyde on 18th February 2021. Her lecture, facilitated by online webinar, is available in a new web-based archive devoted to the Kilbrandon Lectures.<sup>i</sup>

## Reference

The Promise (2020). *Residential care*. [www.thepromise.scot](http://www.thepromise.scot)

## About the author

Dr Graham Connelly CPsychol is the editor of the Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care and an honorary senior research fellow with CELCIS and the School of Social Work and Social Policy in the University of Strathclyde. Graham's research interests have ranged over alternative care internationally and more particularly the education of care experienced children and adults. He is a non-executive director of Kibble Education and Care Centre, a trustee of MCR Pathways school-based mentoring programme.

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<https://www.strath.ac.uk/humanities/schoolofsocialworksocialpolicy/thekilbrandonlectures/>