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Book Review

The State of It: Stories from the Frontline of a Broken Care System

By Chris Wild

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The State of It is a clarion call from the frontlines of a care system in need of urgent change. The author, Chris Wild, is a care experienced campaigner, advocate and care sector professional. He leverages his own personal story of growing up in care in England from the age of 11 alongside the heart-breaking accounts of many young people he encountered along the way, both as a resident and later a professional in the sector, to call attention to how the system is broken, and suggesting ways in which it can be fixed.

In reading this book, I found myself simultaneously gripped and repelled. Gripped by Wild's adept storytelling which transports the reader into the private worlds of young people whose tragic life trajectories have led them into a 'care' system with rampant carelessness; where they can encounter neglect, physical, sexual and emotional abuse and their experiences often leave them with more harm and trauma than they came in with. Repelled by the fact that this Dickensian scenario is not mere storytelling but a factual account of the real lives which have been shattered by the systemic and multifaceted failings of the care system in modern-day Britain. Wild tackles the old perennial issues, such as scarce resources, alongside new ones, like county lines drug gangs, with a sensitivity to the intersectional challenges that young people coming into the system face, discussing how gender, ethnicity, age, immigration status and disability confluence to create added struggles for the various young people, and how the system is ill-equipped to cater to these nuances.

The lived experience accounts give this book its weight and urgency, and Wild's advocacy for the voiceless is compelling. He prefaces the book by telling his own



story, which is punctuated by poverty, misfortune and rebellion contextualised by a decline in public funding of services across the board. These are recurring themes in the book, but poverty looms large as a factor which undergirds and precipitates the lives of children in care. Wild traces the failings within the system itself predominantly to government cuts, which have led to insufficiencies in staff training and pay, as well as inadequate provision of mental health services and other vital necessities such as actual accommodation. Wild points to an overwhelmed system which cannot meet demand and has resorted to over-reliance on semi-independent homes which young people can move into after the age of 16. These are commercial and privately run homes which are unregulated and often focus on profit as their bottom line, which means that children are seen as a business. The system is also criticised for failing to prepare children for the future. The 'care cliff', when a child turns 18 and is expected to leave care and make their own living arrangements, is a terrifying time when vulnerability to homelessness and exploitation increases because affordable homes are scarce and young people do not have the skills and means to support themselves.

The book can at first glance seem unbalanced, with disaster at every turn and the only good news told being of those who succeed despite the system rather than because of it. However, Wild purposefully picks stories which highlight the failings of the system to reveal the real human cost of our collective inaction as a society to safeguard some of our most vulnerable children. The book is unapologetic in its exposition of the historic and ongoing disdain of children in care as well as reporting on a long mismanaged and underfunded system that is buckling under pressure. To dispel despondency at 'The State of It' all, Wild makes four key recommendations; better funding, more regulation, more staff, and greater accountability. Although his recommendations are targeted at the care system in England, these are measures which could improve children's experiences in many countries. In the book, Wild goes into greater detail about exactly how these recommendations could be implemented to save the system.

Although brilliantly written, this book is not an easy read. Wild is quite matter of fact in how he sheds light on the dark underbelly of our society, where vulnerable children fall prey to exploitation by drug gangs and sexual predators, are let down by their designated carers, and are burdened by stigma and shame in an 'ill-formed and mismanaged' system - leaving little room for successful futures, where those who make it do so against the odds. Adverse mental health, substance abuse and deaths of despair are a common fallout of this failed system and Wild talks with great empathy and compassion about those he has known and lost personally, the many unaccounted, as well as his own struggles with all of the above. The reader is left intentionally uncomfortable, if not outright disturbed, with the aim of being galvanised into action. Wild's message is clear: 'The system is in a state. It is broken and it has to change.'



About the reviewer

Khutso is a public health and health policy doctoral researcher in the department of social work and social policy at the University of Strathclyde. Her work focusses on the intersection of poverty and mental health inequalities within marginalised communities. Khutso has a multidisciplinary background in law, philosophy and psychology which she combines to critically interrogate social issues. Her overarching research interests are in exploring how race and gender inform mental health outcomes, socio-economic standing and lived experience in general, as well as evaluating policy as a site for social justice.

The Scottish Journal of Residential Child Care supplied a copy of this book for review.

