Slipping through the Cracks

Comparing Media and Organisational Discourse on the Children's Care System in Scotland - **An Executive Summary**

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Introduction

Scotland's ongoing 'root and branch' review of the care system represents an important opportunity to make positive and enduring changes in the lives of children and families. A growing body of research about child development, the effects of childhood trauma and adversity and the role of systems and policies in fostering positive developmental outcomes has bolstered the case for systemic reform. This research speaks to the importance of stability and continuity in care placements, children's need for nurturing and loving relationships and effective ways of addressing backgrounds of complex trauma.[1]

The political climate for comprehensive reform of Scotland's care system is certainly promising. However, advocates face a key challenge: the problematic representation of the children's care system and care-experienced individuals in public discourse. This report, which documents both media and organisational communications strategies related to children in care, is one step in addressing this challenge.

Media coverage of the children's care system, in particular, plays an important role in determining how the public understands and responds to calls to improve the child welfare system. This is because media stories, public thinking and policy are interdependent. For example, crisis- or problem-oriented framing shapes people's beliefs and attitudes about the children's care system by repeating certain stories and frames while excluding others – a phenomenon researchers refer to as the 'drip, drip' effect.[2] As this report documents, and as other scholars have noted, negative depictions of children in care shape the public's thinking and action, sustaining and reinforcing problematic stereotypes, attitudes and behaviours.

The media, however, are not the public's sole source of information about this issue. Advocacy, policy and research organisations may communicate directly with members of the public about the children's care system, as well as indirectly via their work with the media. While their platforms may not be as powerful or popular as the media, they nevertheless frame information for members of the public about care-experienced children, what the care system is and how it might be improved.

This is a short executive summary of a report that identifies dominant frames related to care-experienced children and the care system in the media and in advocacy, policy and research organisations. The full report is designed to provide experts and advocates with a detailed understanding of the existing communications environment. It also analyses how media and organisations' communications practices are likely to impact public thinking. Media coverage can be harmful and misleading – or informative and productive. Organisations can impact the character of that coverage, but not without a deep understanding of the structure of media stories about their issue. The report is designed to provide this understanding and to offer initial recommendations about how experts and advocates might shift the shape of stories about the children's care system. This executive summary outlines Key Findings and Implications from the report, and suggests Next Steps and Initial Recommendations.

Executive Summary

Our research shows that members of the Scottish public have a limited understanding of care experience and the children's care system. According to the public perspective, individuals in the system have experienced significant trauma with long-term effects. Entry into care is viewed as a problem of selfish parents and deficient communities, neither of which is amenable to change. And the need to effectively support those in care is understood to be narrowly about individual outcomes, not collective benefits.

To better understand why these gaps in understanding exist, and to help advocates communicate more effectively, FrameWorks' researchers analysed a sample of 359 media and organisational materials that appeared between 11 December 2015 and 11 December 2017.

Key Findings and Implications

This report identifies the types of narrative and issue framing approaches that compete to shape public thinking and action on issues related to care experience and the care system. Our analysis also explains the findings' implications for public understanding and policy support.

- The media focus extensively on the care system's failure to effectively look after children. News stories reinforce the public's belief that the care system is dysfunctional, fundamentally unable to support all children in need of care and destined to let many 'slip through the cracks'.

- Media and organisational materials rarely describe how the care system impacts society or the collective benefits of improving it. By telling individualised stories, communicators are undermining efforts to help the public see care as a social issue with social solutions.

- Media and organisational materials reinforce negative stereotypes of care-experienced individuals by focusing almost exclusively on negative outcomes. Without a countervailing explanation of the ways that the system supports *positive* child outcomes, the public will continue to see care-experienced individuals as irreparably damaged.

- Media and organisational materials consistently hold government accountable for identifying and addressing problems within the care system. However, these materials lack specificity about governmental actions that help the public understand how laws and policies deliver positive change for care-experienced individuals.

- Organisational materials often incorporate the perspectives and voices of young people with care experience into their public-facing communications. This type of coverage focuses attention on individual agency and positions care-experienced individuals as drivers of reform.

Next Steps and Initial Recommendations

The analysis presented here yields initial strategies that advocates can use to improve messaging. The analysis suggests that advocates should:

- Tell complete stories that include the constituent elements of an effective narrative: a value, a causal explanation, a desirable outcome, and a solution statement that matches the scope of the problem and provides concrete steps to improve outcomes.

- Define the system widely and help people see the range of services it provides.

- When discussing the care system, describe how and why care-experienced children's wellbeing affects all of society – why this is a *social* issue.

- Communicate that outcomes for care-experienced people vary widely and draw attention to the extrinsic and external factors that support resilience.

- Continue to bring care-experienced voices into communications materials wherever possible.

- Avoid simply asserting the connections between causes, consequences and solutions. Instead, *explain* how they are connected in a clear, logical, step-by-step fashion.

More information is available in our full report.