

VICTIMS OF THE



by
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THEY are a hidden population, 250,000 strong but without a proper voice or control over their futures. Shockingly, they are 50 times more likely than their neighbours to have their children taken into care and run a 'significantly' higher risk of losing those children permanently.

Their crime is to be 'slow' intellectually, to have a low IQ or to be labelled as having a learning disability.

Last Saturday, the Daily Mail revealed the scandalous case of a young couple whose family has been destroyed because their IQs did not satisfy Essex County Council.

Their two children, a girl of four and a one-year-old boy, were taken into care after social workers judged that the mother did not have regular routines for her son and daughter, that she left the girl to play alone, could not cook simple meals and took too long brushing her teeth. The father was, bizarrely, said to have too many routines.

The parents had not hurt their children or let them go hungry. There was no sign of abuse or cruelty and, sitting in secret, a family court judge told the couple they had done nothing wrong, but still ordered that the children be put up for adoption to give them 'a better life'.

The view of the social services and the court was that the couple could not meet their children's basic needs. The father said: 'They said our little girl wouldn't reach her full potential if she stayed with us.'

The mother, who has an IQ of 60 but can read and write, added: 'The social workers think I am stupid — but I am not. They have told us that the children are having a new forever mum and dad and that our little girl doesn't like us any more. It really upsets me.'

The outcry following this story has been astonishing. Experts, politicians, campaigners and parents have written, telephoned and e-mailed to express their outrage at what some believe is a sinister experiment in 'social engineering'.

And I have discovered the distressing fact that this is not an isolated case. This couple are by no means alone.

In fact, according to new research by an eminent expert, an astonishing 20 per cent of all local authority care proceedings in this country involve parents with learning disabilities.

They are, according to Professor Tim Booth, a 'disproportionate number' who are likely 'to have their competence as parents judged against stricter criteria or harsher standards than other parents' and 'are disadvantaged in the child protection and court

tion, Essex Social Services called in a psychologist and started legal proceedings to have him taken away from his parents.

The father, who to protect his son cannot be named, says: 'We

involved throughout my wife's life because of her learning disability,' the father says, pacing up and down his small living room. 'And when she had our first child, she had post-

their son when he was taken to his new home with foster parents. The father recalls: 'We had to leave him there. He was only eight and was crying for his mum, holding on to her leg.

Last Saturday, the Mail told the horrific story of a family whose children were confiscated by social services because their loving parents were 'too slow'. The outcry it sparked has been astonishing — and reveals the true scale of this scandal

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They are, according to Professor Tim Booth, a 'disproportionate number' who are likely 'to have their competence as parents judged against stricter criteria or harsher standards than other parents' and 'are disadvantaged in the child protection and court process by rules of evidence and procedure, their own limitations and inadequacies in services'.

He is writing about people like the original couple, who are desperately exploring every legal avenue to challenge the court order that put their son and daughter up for adoption. The father says: 'We have got our MP involved ... it is so hard for the children's mother to believe that she won't ever see them again. This cannot be right.'

And people like another Essex couple who have lost one of their three children to social services. The father has a full-time, responsible job. The mother has a mild learning disability and cannot read and write but is devoted to her three sons, aged ten, four and two.

Their first child had a problem with controlling his bowels and at the age of eight, despite being diagnosed by a specialist in London as having a medical condi-

tion, Essex Social Services called in a psychologist and started legal proceedings to have him taken away from his parents.

The father, who to protect his son cannot be named, says: 'We were blamed for a medical condition. A consultant in London said it was a condition our son would grow out of, but social services said it was us. They said we were bad parents because we gave in to the children and don't keep boundaries.'

'They blamed my wife's learning disability for her not having routines. But we are not bad parents. My wife can't read or write, but she is a lovely mother. You should see her with our boys. This is a happy home and we will do everything we can to get back our oldest son.'

'We have been told he must remain in foster care until he is 18 and we can only see him once a fortnight for four hours.'

Astonishingly, despite taking the first child away, Essex Social Services have neither removed the two younger boys nor put them on an at-risk register.

'Social services have been

involved throughout my wife's life because of her learning disability,' the father says, pacing up and down his small living room. 'And when she had our first child, she had post-natal depression and they always seemed to be here, picking holes in what we were doing.'

'Our boy was a little bit behind

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at school and the psychologist's report said he would do better if he was taken away from the home environment. The solicitor told us we should co-operate with the social services and they would ease our son back into our home. But we have found out they have no such plans. Poor chap, he wants to be home with his mum and dad.'

The couple, who live in a council house filled with toys and baby equipment, went with

their son when he was taken to his new home with foster parents. The father recalls: 'We had to leave him there. He was only eight and was crying for his mum, holding on to her leg. Social services don't know the damage they are doing, ripping kids away from their parents.'

'The reason given for taking him away was unintentional neglect. They are blaming my wife's learning disability for hindering our son's development. They said he was too dependent on his mum, too clinging.'

'What we do not understand is that we are the same parents for the other two boys and they are not being taken away. It doesn't make sense.'

But there is a pattern to these cases. In both, the mothers have learning disabilities and social workers concentrated their criticism on their 'lack of routines'. The first mother claims she was 'set up to fail' by ten professionals involved in her assessment.

The second mother says: 'They kept watching and picking holes in what I did. I still give my littlest one a bottle some-


services because their loving parents were 'too slow'. The outcry it sparked has been astonishing — and reveals the true scale of this scandal

CHILD SNATCHERS



You're not clever enough to have children so we're taking them away

It could come from a Kafka novel... In utter secrecy, a loving couple have both their children confiscated and sent for adoption



From last week's Mail

enforced adoption from interviews with affected parents. 'For these parents, the hurt has not eased nor will their grief abate. However long ago it was since their case was heard, the impact of the proceedings continued to ripple through their lives.

'A quarter of the parents we talked to voluntarily mentioned that they had been, or were going to be, sterilised as a result of having been through care proceedings. There may have been others. It is not possible to tell how far these decisions were taken on health grounds, under the pressure of professional "advice" or from a consuming desire to avoid having to face the same trauma of loss with yet another child.'

He is scathing about the lack of expertise among social workers, who make such fundamental judgments. 'The possibility cannot easily be dismissed that some social workers

complicated area, but there are far more people with learning disabilities living in the community now, having ordinary relationships and having children.

'We don't want a situation where people with learning disabilities are assumed not to be able to be parents. That would be social engineering gone mad. These people need non-intrusive, appropriate support.'

Meanwhile, the Government is being urged to end the secrecy of family courts which sit without a jury or public scrutiny in order to protect the confidentiality of the children. Anyone who tries to raise issues in the public interest risks an injunction and imprisonment. The result is that miscarriages of justice go unnoticed and unchallenged. The Constitutional Affairs select committee recommended earlier this



A family pulled apart: To protect a child — or to satisfy zealots and the orders of a secret court?

times and they say he is too old and must drink out of a cup. My friends don't have someone telling them how to do everything and when to do it. I love my children and I take care of them.'

And in both cases, the fathers were accused of being aggressive and told to go on an anger management course. The first father was then told by his course tutor when he arrived that he didn't have a problem.

The second father has not yet got a date for his course and rolls his eyes at the thought: 'Of course I am angry. They are taking my child away and destroying my family. I don't need classes. I need my son back.'

The second couple are starting a legal battle to discharge the care order and get their son home but, according to Professor Tim Booth, the odds are stacked against them.

The recently retired academic, who held the chair in Sociological Studies at Sheffield University, has just completed a two-year investigation into the treatment of parents with learning disabilities when they become embroiled in care proceedings. His findings are a damning indictment of the system.

In his report, Professor Booth

raises the spectre of widespread discrimination against parents with learning disabilities by social services and the family court system. He and his co-author, Wendy Booth, looked at a total of 437 care proceedings in Sheffield and Leeds and the figures tell their own story:

- Fifteen per cent of all local authority care applications involve a parent with learning difficulties;

- Another 5 per cent of applications involve a parent with borderline learning difficulties;

- Parents with learning difficulties and their children feature in care applications up to 50 times more often than would be expected from their numbers in the population;

- 75 per cent of children with parents with learning difficulties were taken away from the family;

- Two in every five of those children were put up for adoption;

- The children of parents with learning difficulties were significantly more likely to be the subjects of such adoption orders than children of other parents.

But, of course, the human cost behind those statistics is vast. Pro-

fessor Booth says: 'A whirlpool of distress lies hidden in these figures.'

The reality beneath is of mothers, especially, battling against the odds to create a family home, with little but their own impoverished childhood to fall back on by way of example, eventually coming under the surveillance of social workers who are more concerned with policing than supporting their parenting.

He was crying for his mum, holding on to her leg

'The families end up ensnared in an inquiry, operated by rules and standards beyond their understanding, which finally leads to legal proceedings and the loss of a cherished child. Then, they may have another baby, to establish the ordinary family life they crave and hoping to shut the door on the professionals they no longer trust.' But then the interference just starts again.

And he gives a powerful insight into the long-term effects of

the possibility cannot easily be dismissed that some social workers bring their attitudes to the job: that the "professional knows best" culture ... is itself a product of the kind of people attracted into child protection work' — and about government policy which insists the number of adoptions should be increased and the process speeded up.

Arrangements for quicker adoption were introduced in the Adoption and Children Act 2002 in order to get more children out of council care and into families.

However, according to members of the legal profession who were interviewed anonymously for the report, the policy may be encouraging some local authorities to put children up for adoption rather than spend money on supporting parents with learning disabilities.

One solicitor says: 'Removing the child from the parent and placing them with someone who they can just leave them to get on with rather than offering that support is the easier option — so it is discriminatory in a sense.'

Ominously, a judge admitted: 'You know it's terribly easy to go along with the local authority. I mean, it's the easiest way through to go for adoption. It feels safe.' Another judge said simply: 'It depends how people look at someone with learning difficulties; it's something from which you don't recover.'

All of which makes alarming reading for parents caught in the care process and the campaigners who are fighting for their rights.

David Congdon, Mencap's Director of External Relations, said: 'This is most disconcerting. Cases like this show what a difficult situation parents with learning disabilities are placed in. Forty to sixty per cent of parents with a learning disability get their children taken away while the evidence is that with a little bit of support, many are quite capable of looking after their children.'

'It is hard to believe that all of these parents were not able to bring up their children. Taking children away should be the exception — not the norm. The assumption appears to be that these people can't be parents, which is wrong.'

It is a view echoed by the Commissioner for Disability Rights, Philippa Russell, who urges local authorities to put more support systems in place. She says: 'This is a very

issue recommended earlier this year that courts should be more open and publicly accountable, but the Government has yet to act.'

Sarah Harman, a leading children's rights solicitor and sister of Harriet Harman, the newly appointed Minister of State in the Department of Constitutional Affairs, has written

'They took my kid and gave me anger management'

to Beverley Hughes, the new Children's Minister, demanding more transparency in care proceedings.

She says: 'I am currently involved in a case where parents have children living at home and another child placed in care. The breadwinner parent has suffered serious depression and anxiety as a result of one of his children being placed away from home and has been less and less able to do his job.'

As a result, his employers are taking disciplinary proceedings against him, yet he is forbidden by the secret court from discussing the reason for his troubles. Yet again, the system seems to be riding roughshod over some of the most vulnerable in society.

As Professor Booth sums it up: 'The parents' stories have a kind of inevitable momentum about them, driven less by what was happening in their lives than by the dynamics of the process in which they had become entrapped. It is this that accounts for the apparent gulf between the general ordinariness of the family's troubles and the pathos of the final outcome.'

Meanwhile, a spokesperson for Essex Social Services said: 'We are aware of no occasion where a court in Essex has ever placed a child in the care of the County Council simply because one or both parents have learning difficulties.'

'Ninety-nine per cent of children and young people referred to Essex County Council's Children's Service remain with their families and we assess the needs of each and every child on the at-risk register before deciding the best possible support for that child.'