

Infant Life Protection

1890s – 1960s

Other Names: • ILP

Details

Infant Life Protection was a program that emerged in response to rising concerns about ‘baby farming’ in the late nineteenth century – this was the practice of infants, usually born to single mothers, being placed in private homes to be nursed and boarded, for a fee. There was a very high mortality rate for ex-nuptial infants, especially those who were not wet-nursed and instead fed artificially with cows’ milk. The infant life protection laws passed in Australia were modelled on the British Infant Life Protection Act 1872. They required the registration of anyone taking in a child under the age of 2. At different times, and in different jurisdictions, infant life protection was administered by local boards of health, the police and child welfare departments.

In the colony of Victoria, the Public Health Amendment Act 1883 had a section devoted to infant life protection (ILP). It required anyone taking more than one child under the age of two into their home for nursing to register with their local board of health, which was responsible for approving and keeping a register of all such premises. The occupier of the approved premises was also required to keep a register of children received. Deaths of such children were to be notified within 24 hours and an inquest had to be conducted unless a medical officer was prepared to sign a death certificate. Relatives and institutions dedicated to the care of children did not need to register under this legislation.

According to Swain (2016), the lack of a specific inspection regime limited the impact of this 1883 Victorian legislation. With the Infant Life Protection Act 1890, responsibility for administering the ILP program shifted to the police. In 1907, the Infant Life Protection Act expanded the system to cover all children under 5 and transferred all responsibilities to the Department of Neglected Children.

Under the Victorian 1907 Act, all placements were to be arranged through the Department, which was also responsible for maintaining a private register detailing the child’s parentage, and for setting and collecting weekly payments. Where payments fell more than four weeks in arrears, the child automatically became a state ward. All children were subject to medical inspection and any found to be suffering from epilepsy or syphilis (major causes of death under the old system), were removed from nurses and made wards.

In Tasmania the first infant life protection legislation was in 1907, which required women who had the care of an infant, not their own, for more than 24 hours, to register with the Police Department. Inspections of their homes were to take place regularly and the Police Commissioner could cancel the registration of inadequate carers. Infant deaths had to be reported within twenty-four hours.

In New South Wales, the Infant Protection Act 1904 had similar provisions relating to the supervision of ‘nursing homes’. This act also made it easier for single mothers to claim maintenance from the child’s father.

In South Australia, infant life protection provisions were part of the broader child welfare legislation. The State Children Act 1895 had a section about the licensing and supervision of lying-in homes, and foster-mothers.

In Western Australia, the licensing of persons and institutions for the care of children under two years of age was first enabled in Western Australia by the Health Act 1898 (Part 7). This provision was repealed in 1907, was transferred to the new State Children Act 1907 (Part 8) and applied to people other than near relatives who were caring for children under the age of 3 years. From 1907, the State Children Department and later agencies responsible for child welfare were responsible for the licensing process. The State Children Act Amendment Act 1919 extended this protection to children under 6 years of age.

Part 8 of the WA State Children Act 1907 enabled licensing of foster-mothers. Licenses could be granted to institutions and/or individuals. The Manager of the Institution was an actual person who was named in the government gazette for the purpose of being the foster-mother where the foster-mother was an institution. The names of private foster-mothers were not usually published (except in some years, if a number of children were placed in a private home). Over the years, the licensed people with whom children were placed with were known as foster mothers or foster parents.

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Related Glossary Terms

- [State Ward \(c. 1880 - 1990s\)](#)
- [Baby Farming \(c. 1867 - c. 1910\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Infant Life Protection Act 1907, Victoria \(1907 - 1915\)](#)
The Infant Life Protection Act 1907 was Victorian legislation.
- [Public Health Amendment Statute 1883, Victoria \(1883 - 1890\)](#)
The Public Health Amendment Statute 1883 was Victoria's first Infant Life Protection legislation.
- [Infant Life Protection Act 1890, Victoria \(1891 - 1915\)](#)
The Infant Life Protection Act 1890 was Victorian legislation.
- [Infant Protection Act 1904, New South Wales \(1904 - 1923\)](#)
The Infant Protection Act 1904 was the first ILP legislation in New South Wales.
- [Infant Life Protection Act 1905, Queensland \(1905 - 1966\)](#)
The Infant Life Protection Act 1905 was the first Infant Life Protection legislation in Queensland.
- [State Children Act 1895, South Australia \(1895 - 1927\)](#)
The State Children Act 1895 had a section about infant life protection.
- [Infant Life Protection Act 1907, Tasmania \(1907 - 1920\)](#)
The Infant Life Protection Act 1907 was Tasmania's first infant life protection legislation.
- [Health Act 1898, Western Australia \(1898 - 1911\)](#)
The Health Act 1898 was the first infant life protection legislation in Western Australia.

Resources

- Swain, Shurlee, [*"The supervision of ... babies is women's work, and cannot be rightly done by men": Victorian women's organisations and female child welfare inspectors 1890-1915*](#), Victorian Historical Journal, November 2008
- Harris, Helen Doxford, [Infant Life Protection Act 1890 - Information compiled by Helen D. Harris OAM, 2004-10.](#), No date
- Harris, Helen D, [Victoria Police Involvement in the Infant Life Protection Act 1893-1908](#), Provenance, 2010

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