

Voluntary Placement

1880s – 1970s

Other Names: • Private Placement

Details

Voluntary placement is a term to describe the practice of parents or relatives putting a child into a Home, outside of child welfare legislation. These children (sometimes referred to as 'voluntary wards', 'non wards', or 'private children') came into 'care' under informal arrangements, often due to economic difficulties or a family crisis that made it extremely difficult to look after the child in the family home. For example, a child could be placed in a Home during times of illness (particularly if the mother was sick and the father had to work) or when marriages broke down, or when parents had to move to the country to work and didn't have family accommodation available. A child in such a situation was sometimes referred to as a voluntary ward. As Joanna Penglase points out, for the majority of families, 'there was little about it that was voluntary when there were so few other options available' (Penglase, 2005, p.67).

Children were 'voluntarily' placed in institutions for a variety of reasons, but the most common was a family crisis or economic hardship that left parents with no other option. Often, children were put into Homes by their parent/s with the intention of it only being a short term stay. Unfortunately, for some children, this short term plan resulted in a longer stay in the institution. Parents and family members were expected to make a contribution towards the cost of keeping the child in the institution. If parents failed to keep up regular payments, a child could be made a ward of the state.

In Victoria in 1891, the Inspector of Charities used the term 'voluntary admission' in his annual report, to distinguish between children who were placed in children's homes via the courts, and those who were placed 'voluntarily'. In Western Australia, in evidence to the Select Committee of the Legislative Council on the State Children Act Amendment Bill in October 1918, the Catholic Archbishop of Perth was asked, 'by whom are the private children maintained?'. He answered (p.19): 'Usually what happens is this: a parent, or parents, promise to pay as much as the Government pay. Some of the parents pay, while in the majority of cases no payment at all is made. Then the institution has to bear the cost.'

Swain and Howe (1989) describe the 'voluntary' placements in children's homes in the nineteenth century as more likely to be 'respectable' children (as opposed to waifs, strays or uncontrollable young offenders, who were more likely to be wards of state, under the guardianship of the Neglected Children's Department).

Parents would sometimes place their children in a Home on a temporary basis, for example during times of crisis, illness or poverty. For example, in the early twentieth century, the Methodist Children's Home in Cheltenham, Victoria, had many admissions on this 'voluntary' basis. Between 1904 and 1909, 64% of children admitted stayed at the Home for less than six months. Almost 40% returned to their parents after their time at the Home.

From the end of the 1920s in Victoria, religious and charitable institutions increasingly took in children for longer-term stays and the temporary, voluntary placements declined. The passage of the Children's Welfare Act in 1954 eroded much of the powers of private persons or voluntary agencies to apprehend children, although 'private placements' were still allowed by negotiation with individual parents.

In its submission to the Forgotten Australians inquiry, the Victorian Government stated that between 1928 and the 1970s there were large numbers of children placed in care voluntarily by their parents, who did not become Victorian state wards. The submission also stated that in the period 1949 to 1954 there were at least 1,900 children in children's homes who were not wards at any one time, compared to 1,100 state wards in the same children's homes. It is not known how many of these 1,900 children went on to become state wards, and it is not known whether periods of time in care were similar for both groups.

In the twentieth century, state and territory governments made some forms of financial assistance available to struggling families in the hope that this would prevent children being placed in institutions. In Victoria the Children's Welfare Act 1954, Part V allowed people to apply for a weekly sum towards a child's maintenance, if they were 'without sufficient means of support for such child and ... unable by any legal means to obtain sufficient means of support for such child'. The Department declared that 'money spent on these families is a good social investment' (Annual Report, 1956, p.13).

Despite these measures, many parents found themselves in a position where they were unable to keep caring for a child or children, and took the decision to place a child in an institution. One submission to the 2004 Senate inquiry described the predicament his family found themselves in before being placed in 'care' by his mother:

My mother had just been divorced and could not afford to look after us. We had a good home life before the divorce ... never went without anything, my mother never had to work, but when we moved to Balmain into a house owned by distant relatives, we had an upstairs flat ... Now at the time there were no childcare centres, so that's how we ended up at Goulburn, we were forced to become Catholics so we could go to St John's so my mother could go to work. I was told only for a short time, till she could afford to bring us home (Submission 297, Bill Cremen).

Another woman told her story about the family circumstances after her mother left the family: "Dad put us in a Home". Else thinks that 'the Welfare might have threatened to remove us' and would have separated them if her father had not 'voluntarily' put them in a Home, where in fact they did remain together (Penglase, p.82).

Children who were placed in the system under private or voluntary arrangements left a different trace in the records and archives. The lesser government intervention and oversight of these arrangements usually meant that fewer records were created or kept. The 'Forgotten Australians' report (2004) noted that 'non-wards' experienced particular difficulties in their search for records about their time in care.

Because we were not legally 'Wards of the State', we have no records except for admission data [Submission No. 6].

Because of this paucity of records, 'non-wards' were described in the Report as 'largely invisible' to the state authorities. Tierney observed in 1963 that the Children's Welfare Department had accurate lists of all state wards but little reliable information about children based on a voluntary basis. Penglase writes about how it was very common for religious and charitable institutions not to count 'voluntary' admissions in their annual reports. For this reason, she concludes that 'it is almost impossible even to estimate the numbers of children who were not state wards who lived in Australian Children's Homes over the 20th century: they inhabit a statistical limbo' (Penglase, p.354).

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