

Record Creation

In his book *Children who need help* (1963), social worker Len Tierney described how welfare departments thought about recordkeeping:

For good or bad, the child went forth into the unknown, a receipt for his person secured, and a brief history of the child sent to the Superintendent of the institution. This history was no more than a précis of the Police complaint, a statement of the court decision, and an itemised account of the disposal of the other children in the family. There the child would remain, and for practical purposes the file was closed, until it became necessary to remove him from the institution. For the time being, the Department had fulfilled its legislative functions, and no further action ensued until it was necessary to make a new decision about his disposal.

If you were a [state ward \(or 'ward of state'\)](#), it is likely that the state government has wardship records relating to your time in care. Various documents were generated in the process through which a child was deemed to be a ward of state, including court records, police records and departmental records.

Attitudes to recordkeeping in children's homes run by charitable and church organisations were not very different from government departments. A report from Victoria in 1957 spoke of "the absence of all individual records in some institutions and of adequate records in most". Different homes had different approaches to keeping records, and it's likely that various staff members kept various kinds of records.

One Superintendent, Keith Mathieson, wrote about what we would now call "best practice" in recordkeeping in 1959. His views about what records should be kept for the child were the exception, not the rule. It is very unlikely that a person applying for their records would receive a 'personal case history' like the one described by Mathieson, with a 'continuing record of matters of consequence in the child's life' and copies of documents like school reports, birth certificates, photographs and 'other papers which the child may like to have later'.

A more common experience is to receive sparse records with little information. One person described his experience to the 'Forgotten Australians' inquiry:

After 18 years as a 'Ward of the State' and some 32 years later, I finally get enough nerve to have the audacity to ask the system for whatever relevant details they may or may not have on me during my childhood ... I get two sheets of paper with about 9 or 12 lines on it, I look at these two sheets and I am devastated, 18 years of my life on two sheets of paper.

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