

The absent elephant in the 2016 'Modernising Child, Youth and Family Expert Panel Report'

A guest post by [David Kenkel](#)

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Sometimes the most interesting thing about a new policy document or report is not what is present in the document but what is absent.

On receiving the report [Investing in New Zealand's Children and Their Families](#) I used the very simple textual analysis technique of searching for the frequency of what I considered important words. Such a simple analysis does not necessarily create a window into the minds and thinking of the authors; however it does give some indications about what they consider important at least as measured by how frequently they talk about it.

In descending incidence of occurrence and not including the references and appendixes this is what my word count revealed:

Investment mentioned 240 times
Trauma mentioned 50 times
Love mentioned 36 times
Deprivation mentioned 4 times
Inequality mentioned 1 time
Poverty mentioned 1 time

Despite the often unspoken reality that the vast majority of return visit CYFS clients are poor, and that people on reasonable incomes seldom have long-term contact with CYFS, it seems that the authors of the report do not see poverty as having any great relevance to the business of CYFS. Given the truly astounding amount of data demonstrating clear links between poverty, deprivation and increased levels of neglect and abuse of children it seems an extraordinary oversight (Duva, Metzger, 2010; Wynd, 2013; Sedlak, Mettenburg, Basena, Petta, McPherson, Greene, & Li, 2010).

This seems even more the case when you consider the equally astounding amounts of data (Szalavitz, 2010; Murali & Oyebode, 2004) showing that poverty plays a causative role in many of the other factors associated with increased levels of child abuse and neglect: these are factors such as parental depression, poor mental health, high levels of family stress, insecure overcrowded and unhealthy housing, and increased levels of drug and alcohol abuse as self medication to manage misery (Brown, Cohen, Johnson & Salzinger, 2010).

None of this is news to social scientists, or to anybody who has spent any time at all working with abused and neglected children and their families. People have known this since the days of Dickens. It does not take a great leap of empathic imagination to understand that the fear, despair, and hopelessness created by trying to survive day to day without adequate resources are not useful additions to the tool box of good parenting.

Inequality also rated only one mention in the report. The fact that being poor and living in a starkly unequal society, such as New Zealand, correlates with higher levels of child abuse and neglect (and many other social ills) is newer information, but again well researched (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). Sadly, New Zealand has been identified as one of the most starkly unequal societies in the OECD (Rashbrooke, 2014). What is striking about our inequality is that it is relatively new. From a reasonably equal society 30 years ago we now live in a country where nearly a quarter of our children live in poverty ([Office of the Children's Commissioner](#) 2012 & 2013) and a small number of very rich people enjoy conspicuously opulent lifestyles. Social commentators such as Max Rashbrooke (2013 & 2015) express concern that New Zealand increasingly suffers from a compassion gap: an inability for the well-off amongst us to make sense of the poor as fundamentally like themselves only in straitened circumstances.

The withering of our capacity to see ourselves in the suffering other is not (in my opinion) helpful for the development of policies to create better parents and safer children. See Wynd at [Child Poverty Action](#) for a discussion of the role that poverty plays. Such a stunting of empathy may, however, provide an excellent addition to a national toolkit concerned with controlling and managing the poor and rescuing their children from their nastiness. (An unkind interpretation would suggest this is in essence is what the report aims for CYFS to do). Parental management and child rescue are able to be undertaken without ever naming the central problems of poverty, deprivation and marginalisation. It's rather like one of those magic shows where a genius magician manages to hide a very large elephant in a very small room by paying frantic attention to everything but the elephant.

The report speaks a great deal about trauma and love; and of course it is impossible not to agree that trauma is a bad thing and needs to be attended to and that children need to be loved. This is not a new insight. What the report seems to ignore is that the experience of poverty itself is increasingly traumatic in New Zealand. Large numbers of people report terror at the idea of approaching WINZ and a [Canterbury research](#) study reports that many people report feeling deeply humiliated and wounded by their encounters with our increasingly punitive and harsh social welfare system (Morton, Gray, Heins & Carswell, 2014). Insecure low paid work is also frequently reported to have a traumatising effect on workers with high rates of depression and anxiety disorders amongst those struggling to get by on low wages (Reeves, Mckee, Mackenbach, Whiteboard & Stuckler, 2016).

Again, it does not take a huge leap of imaginative empathy to understand that when life is experienced as humiliating and brutalising the daily challenge of gifting one's children with frequent and genuine displays of warmth and love becomes harder. Perhaps the solution is not to pluck children out of supposedly unloving homes and slide them into the supposedly warm embrace of well resourced middle class families; but rather to work as a society at creating the conditions for all New Zealand's

families where the flow of loving kindness comes easily. That's the kind of investment I'd like to see.

References and other reading:

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