



Fast

FACTS

CANADIAN CENTRE FOR POLICY ALTERNATIVES – MANITOBA

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Child Welfare in a Neoliberal Era—Past, Present, and Future

Available to the public online through the University of Toronto library is an insightful doctoral dissertation in which the student, Kristen Smith, interviewed front-line child welfare workers in Ontario. She was interested in how they defined themselves, their roles, and their responsibilities in a field that has undergone neoliberal restructuring since the Mike Harris Conservative government of the 1990s.

Harris' governmental approach, termed the "Common Sense Revolution", saw the overhaul of the province's health and social service sectors by introducing a flood of cuts, downsizing and privatization measures that left many social workers — including Smith herself — with a diminished sense of ethical purpose. As she notes, neoliberal restructuring tends to place increasing constraints and tensions on social workers due to new administrative procedures that standardize processes of service delivery and shift practice boundaries, resulting in oversimplified approaches and fragmented labour practices. Workers become continuously pressed for time during their contacts with clients, and key aspects of what they deem good practice are effectively pushed out of their work.

Although there has been little mention of it in the public discussion surrounding the Phoenix Sinclair tragedy, Manitoba has its own history of neoliberal restructuring in the child welfare field. After being elected

in 1988 and again by a thin majority in 1990, Progressive Conservative Premier Gary Filmon embarked on his own neoliberal agenda of cutting spending to health care and social services. In 1991, the Aboriginal Justice Inquiry made several recommendations for repairing Manitoba's child welfare system, including devolution to Aboriginal agencies; but the AJI had been established by the previous NDP government and the Filmon government had no vested interest in adopting its recommendations. Instead child welfare in Winnipeg was recentralized under a single agency, effectively dissolving the six regional agencies that were operating at the time. Workers were distanced from communities, and more responsibility was placed in the hands of parents with increasingly limited supports. At the time of Phoenix Sinclair's birth in 2000, workers continued to be moved out of communities into large, central offices.

What effect did neoliberal restructuring of child welfare have on workers, the system, and the services families were receiving during the life of Phoenix Sinclair? It was in the midst of these changes that Phoenix Sinclair not only lived, but died tragically in 2005. There are certainly parallels between what Smith identified in her work and what Winnipeg CFS workers have said about their work environments in their testimonies to the Phoenix Sinclair Inquiry: most have cited large caseloads, multiple workload demands, and stress as impediments to serving families in Winnipeg whose needs were become increasingly complex.

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After Gary Doer and the NDP were elected in 1999, the process of devolution to Aboriginal agencies began. While this was a positive and crucial step forward for child welfare in Manitoba, the downsizing of Winnipeg CFS that accompanied this process exacerbated some of the problems workers were already experiencing. Workers have testified that there continued to be a high volume of cases, and a shortage of staff to manage them.

The issue of funding is to be examined in greater detail in phase two of the Inquiry, but going forward, it is important to recognize that neoliberalism is an ideology not only relevant in Manitoba to child welfare's past, but to its future. A 2006 review of Manitoba's child welfare system by the Manitoba Ombudsman recommended the development and implementation of standardized risk assessments, and in 2008 Family Services and Housing Minister Gord Mackintosh announced that a standardized risk assessment tool had been developed for use in Manitoba child welfare agencies.

Interestingly, standardized risk assessments also constituted one of the reforms to child welfare in Ontario during the neoliberal years of the Mike Harris government. A number of child deaths garnered significant media and public attention, prompting the government to introduce new standardized and allegedly highly-intrusive risk assessment procedures coupled with strict regulatory measures to ensure compliance on the part of social workers. Computerized tracking systems allowed supervisors to monitor workers to ensure they were complying with new regulations, while the standardized risk assessments — which Smith describes as governed by the neoliberal logic of “auditability” — allowed the province to regulate and manage the types of interventions done with families. Is this the direction in which Manitoba is headed?

The standardized risk assessments are being implemented in Manitoba as part of a new approach to child welfare that emphasizes

the importance of early prevention and the building of community capacity by child welfare agencies, but what this approach ignores is any separate measures or policies aimed at reducing poverty and promoting socioeconomic well-being, particularly in Winnipeg's inner city, which is home to a large number of families involved with the child welfare system. Access to affordable housing has not improved for the majority of inner city residents, and EIA rates have been stagnant for years, putting increased financial stress on low-income families. The problems for families that often result from these issues are the same ones that child welfare agencies are tasked with identifying and responding to.

The child welfare system cannot resolve these problems on its own. If the experiences of Ontario are any indication, Manitoba's child welfare system may be moving in a continued neoliberal direction when it comes to risk management and control — one that promotes the view that pre-detection of risk and empowerment of individuals are the only ways to respond to poverty and other social problems. As long as people do not have things like adequate income and housing, risk will remain, regardless of the efforts of the child welfare system to manage it.

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