

POINT AND COUNTERPOINT NOT THE LAST WORD

Child Statistical Abuse: 80,000 Child Prostitutes in Australia

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It was the beleaguered Sydney Morning Herald that started my concern about child statistical abuse in Australia. A small paragraph in "Column 8" pointed out that a program on the similarly beleaguered ABC had claimed that 38 percent of Australians die of heart disease each year. Then "Column 8" discovered something called the cholesterol check card, issued by the Better Health Screening Service, which claimed that 50 percent of us die from cardiovascular disease each year. What, asked "Column 8", will the Better Health Screening Service do after two years when there is no-one left in Australia?

The irony of it all, of course, is that "Column 8" and its mathematics are also suspect because it will take longer than two years for all Australians to die of cardiovascular disease. If the population of Australia is 16 million, then 50 percent (or eight million) will die this year, leaving eight million of whom 50 percent (or four million) will die next year thus leaving four million... No wonder the ABC and Fairfax are in trouble.

The whole process leaves us feeling valiumed, slightly removed from reality. There are frequently two processes at work in our use of statistics: firstly, the need to use statistics to lend credibility to arguments; secondly, at best, the careless use of reliable statistics, or at worst, the irresponsible pastime of what I call "creative statistics." If you have no data, make some up.

Recent newspaper articles have indicated that every fourth person has a drink problem, every fourth person has a drug problem, every fourth person has a mental health problem, or (see below) every fifth person will have a mental health problem unless mental health services are improved. Surely there must be someone out there who is reasonably contented without the chemical assistance of a Carlton or cocaine. It is hard to believe if you read the newspapers.

Of course, we have to allow for a certain journalistic licence but the journalist has to start somewhere. Let's return to the story that one in five Australians will have some mental illness unless mental health services are improved. This story appeared in *The Age*: "Professor tips upsurge in mental illness by 2001" and was written by Peter Schumpeter. According to the article, the President of the Australian National Association for Mental Health, Professor Graham Burrows, said that "about three million Australians" had suffered from some form of mental illness:

Statistics indicated that in 13 years, the number would rise to about 3.5 million, or 18.6 percent of the population. (The Age, 8th December, 1987)

There are a number of points to be made about these sorts of statements. Firstly, on the positive side, it is good that we have some idea that some people believe the mental health problems of our society are increasing and might continue to increase. It allows governments, hopefully, to plan and to make allowances for resource allocation. On the negative side, however, we are led down some strange paths. Note that 18.6 percent of the population, not 18.5 or 18.7 percent, will have a mental illness. Precision lends respectability to the process. And how do we define mental illness? It ranges, according to this article, from "... minor stress to major psychotic ailments." Using that definition I have no hesitation in declaring that all Australians will have and have had a mental illness.

There are other assumptions that need to be examined; that we can agree on a definition of mental illness is only one. Will more mental health services prevent such an increase in mental illness?

It seems to be a long way from cardiac problems and psychosis to child prostitution you say. On the surface, perhaps. But the sexual exploitation and abuse of children has become a major concern in recent years. One of the features of this concern has been an escalation of the estimated incidence of the problem. Some say 1 in 10 girls are sexually abused, some say 1 in 4 girls and 1 in 12 boys are sexually abused. At one recent seminar, participants were told that the "true" figure is 1 in 3 girls and some participants at least were left with the impression that this meant that every third girl had been subjected to full intercourse without her consent before the age of 16 years.

In a recent edition of an Australian medical periodical this had been translated into a statement that one father in four sexually abuses his daughter or daughters. Creative statistics indeed.

In an excellent book, social anthropologist Judith Ennew provides us with an extreme example of how we can have fun with figures. In *The Sexual Exploitation of Children* Ennew treads a careful path in examining many of the real issues that surround child sexual abuse

and avoids the sensationalism that many have created.

Ennew explains that even the very best estimates of the size of a problem like child sexual abuse have an unsteady statistical foundation, and that it is important to be aware of this. These "estimates" (perhaps "guesses" would be a better word) are widely quoted because they are the only figures anyone has and, through repetition and being cited in official documents, they become "facts" that can be quoted by everyone.

Ennew gives the example of child prostitution in the USA, where an expert was called to give evidence on the size of the problem to the House of Representatives. Dr. Judianne Densen-Gerber was the expert and she is well known in Australia for her involvement in the Odyssey House programs. Dr. Densen-Gerber, according to Ennew, gave the figure of one million child prostitutes to the House, a figure based on "the research of Robin Lloyd" who claimed that there were 300,000 young boy prostitutes in the USA, and Dr. Densen-Gerber, believing there would be more girls than boys involved in prostitution, added to Lloyd's figures.

This is bad enough, but Judith Ennew quotes from Lloyd's book about how he arrived at his figures, for Lloyd is a journalist not a social scientist.

In researching his book, Lloyd said:

I approached police officers and leaders of gay community with a working figure of 300,000 boy prostitutes in the United States alone. Deputy District Attorney James Grodin, in Los Angeles said, "You won't get any argument from this for that figure." During a television interview I offered the same figure to Morris Kight, the West Coast gay activist. Said Kight, "It might well be double that amount."

But what Kight and Grodin were agreeing to was - at its best - a gut hunch.

R. Lloyd, 1979
Playland: A Study of Human Exploitation. London: Blond and Briggs (Quoted in Ennew, 1986:5)

Thus a journalist, writing a book to appeal to the popular market, cannot find any data and thus creates "a working figure." The journalist asks

people if they agree with this figure (people who perhaps have an interest in the problem being large rather than small) and they don't argue. An expert, called before the House of Representatives, calls it research, adds some girls to the boys and calls it a round million. After all, we all like round figures, that is why we didn't celebrate 199 years of white rule in Australia.

Such mathematical projections appear to be able to grow almost of their own volition once we sow the seed and show some interest. There is at least one reference that claims there are now 1.2 million child prostitutes in the USA. Thus the title of this piece: 80,000 child prostitutes in Australia. If there are 1.2 million in the USA, and the population of the USA is 240 million and our population is 16 million, we thus divide 16 million into...

This claim that child prostitution is a major problem in Australia and involves 80,000 children is as sound a claim as Densen-Gerber's or Lloyd's about child prostitution in the USA. The sad thing is that the only people being harmed by such creative statistics are the very people we profess to help. What we need is more books like Judith Ennew's which attempt to look at the sexual abuse of children in a rational way. Ennew in an incisive last chapter

entitled "One Child at a Time" says:

It seems to me that there is little, or nothing, to be gained from publicizing child abuse by reports of gross numbers. Surely it is sorrow enough to know that one child is being sexually abused, or that one child is living on the streets and selling its sexuality. If there are two, or three, or three thousand it is unbearable knowledge... The child we see, or know to be in danger is our real responsibility, a fact which media campaigns and prurient articles obscure from us.

(Ennew, 1986:143-144)

The use of "gross numbers" frequently masks a battle for resources, a battle that appears to require bigger guns and bigger numbers to fire in the fight for the welfare dollar. Child sexual abuse, like heart disease and mental illness, are labels that hide the pain and anguish, broken families and catastrophic lives behind very real problems. We need accurate and careful research into those problems if the victims are to gain the help that they desperately require. A single case study based on real life is more powerful than talk of thousands or millions. Who could refuse a child?

REFERENCES

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"Not the Last Word"

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