

# How focusing on tragedies promoted a spiral of harmful interventions in the UK

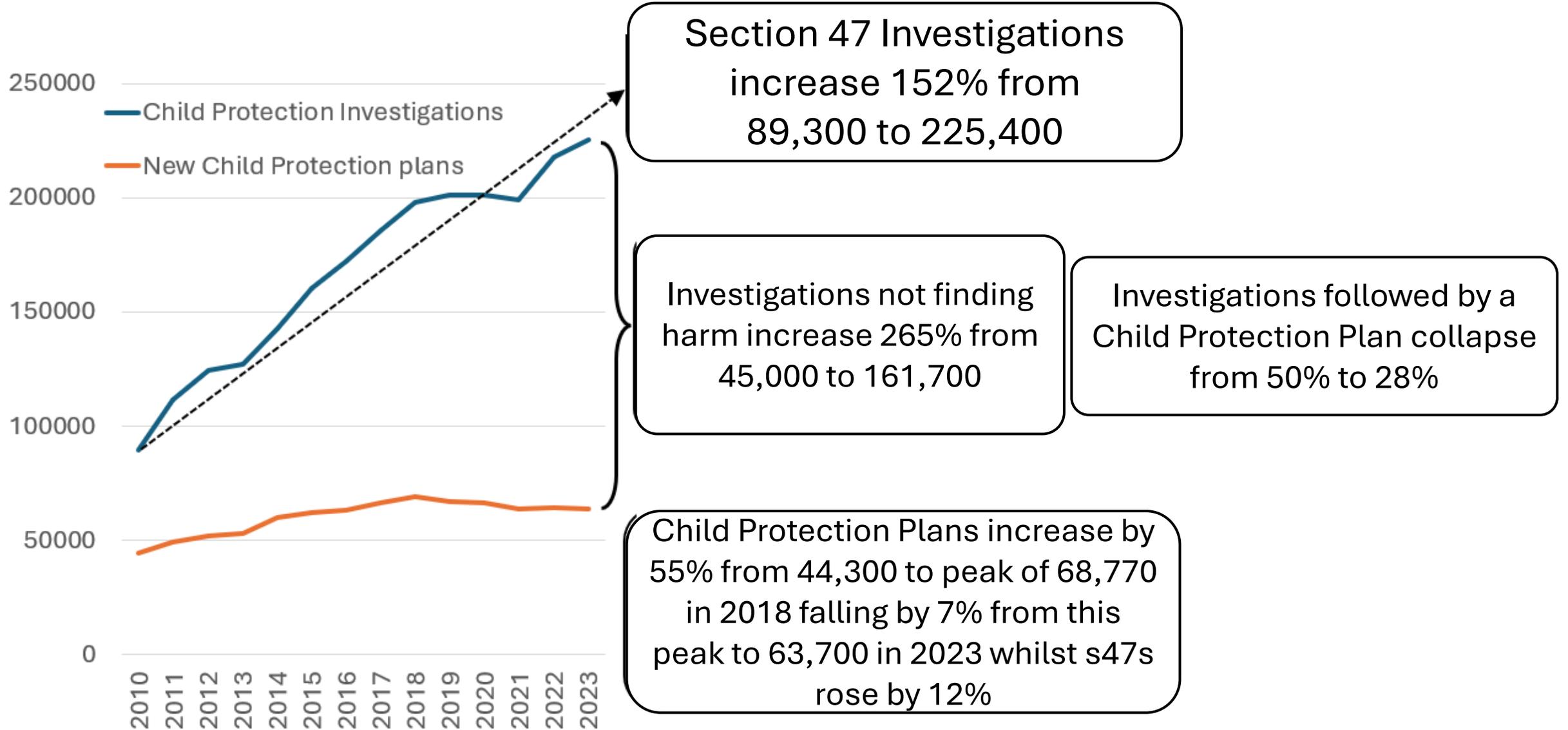
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# The investigative turn



# Increase in separation in England since 2010

	Children in care	Children adopted	Children Special Guardianship
31/3/2010	64,500	42,300	4,400
31/3/2023	83,800	55,800	38,400
Change	Increase 19,300	Increase 13,500	Increase 34,000

**Overall  
Approx. 60%  
Increase in children  
separated**

# Tragedies

- High emotions
- Search for blame
- Justifies harsh responses
- Not representative of overall practice
- Calls for urgent response
- Highly politicised





# Focus on individual blame rather than social harms

Problem defined narrowly in terms of physical, emotional, and sexual violence or neglect perpetrated by individual adults, usually parents or those in positions of trust. Professional and societal responses focus on protection from adult perpetrators.

Reduces recognition of the collective harm and exploitation that is caused by institutions, harmful policies and laws, conflicts, failures of governance, and social disruption.



HM Government

## Working together to safeguard children

A guide to inter-agency working to safeguard and promote the welfare of children

March 2015

“A desire to think the best of adults and to hope they can overcome their difficulties should not trump the need to rescue children from chaotic, neglectful and abusive homes.”

# Parental blame examples

- **Families with a disabled child experiencing “Parental Blame”**  
*investigative approach in response to request for help*
- **‘extra-familial harm’ - risks outside the home including county lines, sexual exploitation and radicalisation.**  
*Children are categorised as ‘beyond parental control’ rather than ‘in perpetrators’ control’ and parents blamed*

# Move from welfare to rescue orientation & defensive practice

- “a highly skilled high performing group of staff that can ‘smell’ the cases likely to lead to death and serious injury”
- Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel’s report on the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson similarly recommended that multi-agency child protection units (MACPU) be established in every local authority with the expertise of children’s social care concentrated in them.
- Model based on Multiagency Safeguarding Hubs (MASH) introduced since 2010 though no evidence of outcomes
- Specific example of Hampshire

# Justifying violating rights

- **Wider information sharing:**  
*Increasing surveillance and breaching right to privacy*
- **Increasing investigations not leading to CPPs**  
*“a price worth paying”*
- **Increasing numbers of children removed from parents whilst family support is hollowed out**
- **Increasing calls for secure accommodation whilst children in care and community have unmet mental health needs**

# Distorted research and crude interpretations

- **The Toxic Trio**

*suggests that domestic abuse, mental ill-health and substance misuse are common features of families where serious harm to children is likely to occur. This is a misinterpretation of poor quality research into serious case reviews and there is no basis for prediction*

- **Bruises in premobile babies as rare and a “sentinel injury”**

*Despite research showing that 27% of premobile babies had an accidental bruise over an average of less than 8 weeks, local and national policies continue to say that such bruising is a “sentinel injury” indicating a high chance of serious harm or death.*

- **Fabricated or Induced Illness – exaggeration of mortality**

*Whilst the Royal college of Psychiatry says “This care-giver behaviour carries a high risk of harm to children. Illness induction is known to carry a 6–9% mortality rate ...with similar rates for long-term disability” My own study into serious case reviews showed no child deaths reported to have been directly due to FII in a 12 year period*

# Does child protection reduce harm?

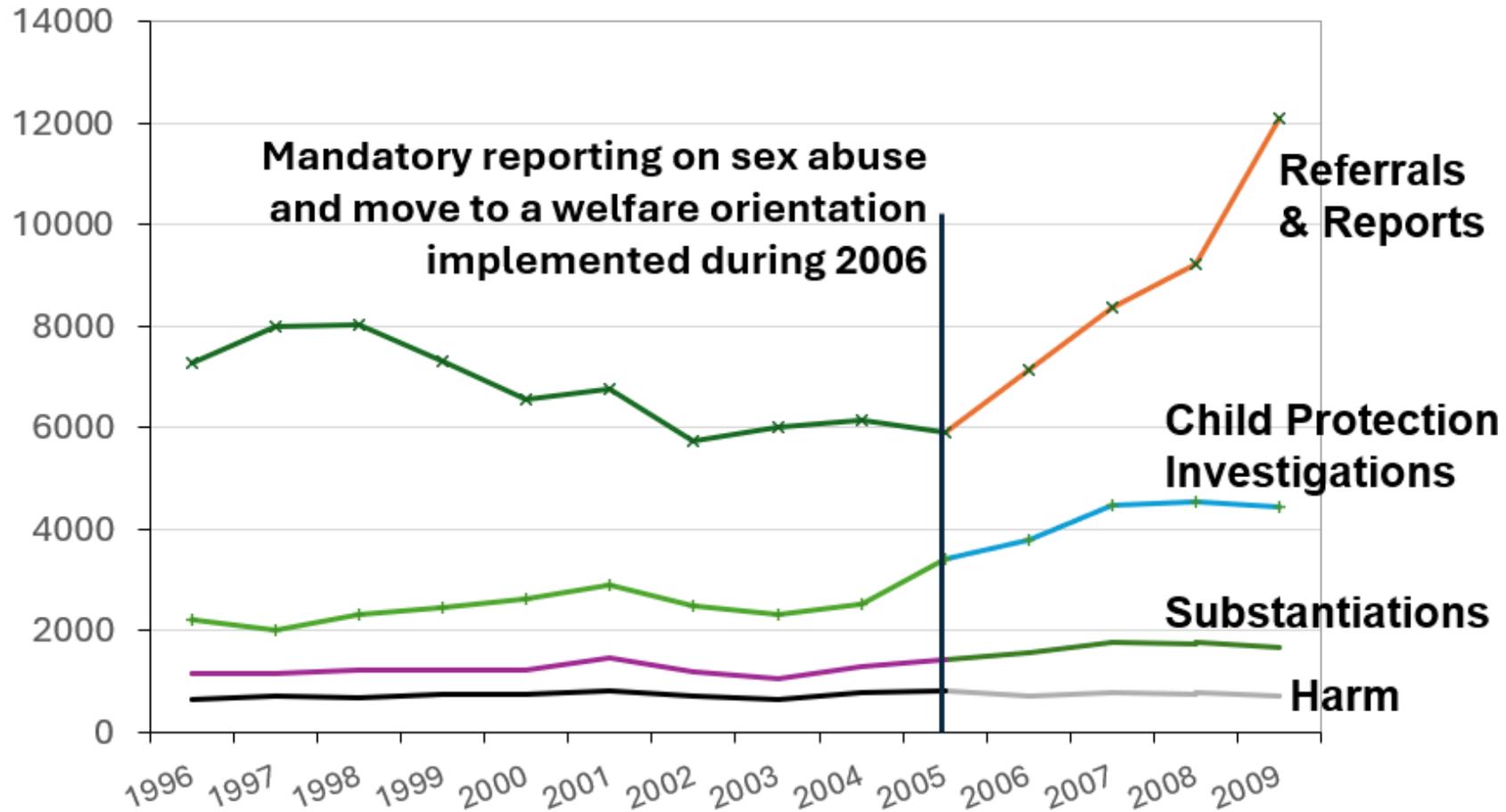
**Our results show no clear evidence for an overall decrease in child maltreatment despite decades of policies designed to achieve such reductions (Gilbert et al., 2012, p. 770).**

**... the developments of child protection policies and practices are only very loosely connected to responding to the social problem of child maltreatment. (Parton 2020 p.32)**

**My research in Western Australia showed no change in harm to children over a 20 year period whilst responses changed significantly – increased investigations and children removed into care**



# Trends in reports, investigations and harm in western Australia

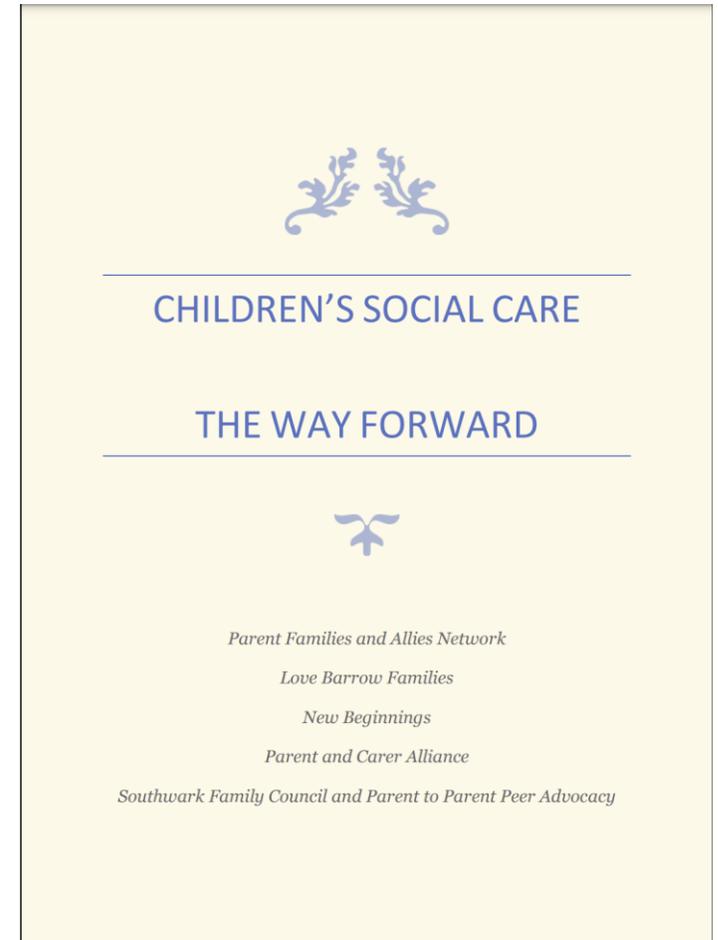


O'Donnell et al. (2010:143) found that in WA between 1990 and 2005, 93.6% of those found to have been maltreated did not have a 'maltreatment' related hospital admission.

# What can be done?

Need to step out of the individualised child protection/rescue paradigm

- Listen to experts by experience (children and parents) to find how they see problems and possible solutions
- Promote peer parent advocacy
- Focus on problems not individuals e.g. taking a public health/educational campaign approach to issues such as the dangers of over-sleeping with infants where these have led to child deaths.
- Strengthen and empower communities
- Focus on support for housing, employment, anti-poverty, mental health, and promoting equity



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