

Baby Farming

c. 1867 – c. 1910

Details

Baby farming is a term that first appeared in the British press in 1867 to describe the practice of placing infants in private homes to be nursed and boarded, for a fee. Ideally, the infant was breastfed by a wet-nurse but if this was not possible, infants were fed artificially with cows' milk. This was a difficult and dangerous practice before refrigeration, clean water supplies or infant formula, so many infants died in care. The term 'baby farming' came into being around the same time that the practice of privately boarding out infants came under scrutiny. In the late nineteenth century in Australia, several women and men were brought before the courts for murdering their infant charges. Media scares and public outrage gave rise to legislation to regulate the practice of baby farming and protect infant life.

In 1868, the British Medical Journal published allegations that baby farming was 'a form of commercial infanticide, that the infants in the care of baby farmers were deliberately and severely neglected, leading to their deaths' (*Encyclopedia of Children and Childhood in History and Society*). On 5 March 1890, *The Age* newspaper portrayed baby farmers as 'ready tools in the hands of heartless mothers, prepared to adopt illegitimate offspring whose lives they regard as of less value than a dog's'.

For single mothers with infants, placing their baby in someone's care could be their only option if they were to make a living. Some women placed advertisements in the newspaper offering their child for adoption, or stating that they were prepared to pay a weekly fee for the baby's support (Weinstein, 2013). For some women, baby farming was a way to rid themselves of an unwanted infant. Some mothers sent their infants to baby farmers and became wet nurses to earn a living.

There was also variation in the circumstances and motivations of the baby farmers, although portrayals of them were almost always negative and sinister. In 1890, the Rev. Benjamin Waugh of the British National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children published an influential and emotive article describing the evils of the baby farmer:

It is this woman who is largely responsible for the terrible death rate among these illegitimates, which is permanently 100 per cent greater than it is amongst all other children.... Whilst in every thousand of the married-born it is 17; of the illegitimate, it is 37.... The deadliness of the receiver's house is the same whether she takes weekly payments or lump sums down. Idleness and bankruptcy can live on three starving children's payments, for there is a constant succession of unwanted children to be had.... And there is little check to her foul play. The child cannot complain; the police are not informed; and the neighbours, when they know a little, do not interfere (Waugh, 1890).

There were some notorious cases involving baby farming in the late nineteenth century. In 1893, John and Sarah Makin were convicted of the murder of Horace Amber Murray after the bodies of twelve or thirteen babies were discovered buried in backyards in inner-city Sydney. In 1894, Frances Knorr was one of only five women to be hanged in Victoria, after the discovery of infant corpses in a backyard in Brunswick. In Western Australia, Mary Burton was convicted of manslaughter for baby farming in Fremantle in January 1888. Alice Mitchell was the

most infamous baby farmer in Western Australia, with the Coroner remarking that her practices were 'loathsome, disgusting and immoral.' Mitchell was jailed for manslaughter in 1907, government inspectors were sacked, and the case stimulated wide public interest in child welfare reform in WA.

Concern about infanticide and practices such as baby farming gave rise to organisations like the [Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children](#) (established in Melbourne in 1896) and the [Children's Protection Society](#) (founded in 1903 in Tasmania). It also led to the establishment of new institutions such as foundling hospitals and infant asylums. In Sydney, the first such institutions were the Sydney Female Mission Home and the Sydney Foundling Institution. In Queensland, the Association for the Saving of Infant Life, founded in 1916 by a group of private citizens, ran a number of infant homes.

The widespread public concern also resulted in the passing of new laws designed to regulate baby farming and protect infant life. For example, in Victoria, the Public Health Amendment Act 1883 was the colony's first attempt to legally regulate baby farming. This Act made local boards responsible for overseeing the registration of children placed in the homes of people other than their families. This was followed by Infant Life Protection Act of 1890 (which was not implemented for another 3 years after the legislation passed). The 1890 law required people to be registered if they were nursing or maintaining an infant under two years of age, and made the police responsible for overseeing these placements. Another Infant Life Protection Act in 1907 required parents to register all voluntary foster placements with the Neglected Children's Department.

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Related Glossary Terms

- [Infant Life Protection \(1890s - 1960s\)](#)

Related Legislation

- [Infant Life Protection Act 1907, Victoria \(1907 - 1915\)](#)
- [Public Health Amendment Statute 1883, Victoria \(1883 - 1890\)](#)
- [Infant Life Protection Act 1890, Victoria \(1891 - 1915\)](#)
- [Children's Protection Act 1892, New South Wales \(1892 - 1902\)](#)
- [Infant Protection Act 1904, New South Wales \(1904 - 1923\)](#)
- [Children's Protection Act 1902, New South Wales \(1902 - 1923\)](#)
- [Infant Life Protection Act 1907, Tasmania \(1907 - 1920\)](#)
- [The Public Health Act 1903, Tasmania \(1904 - 1935\)](#)

Some clauses in the Public Health Act were intended to regulate baby farming.

- [State Children Act 1907, Western Australia \(1907 - 1948\)](#)
- [Health Act 1898, Western Australia \(1898 - 1911\)](#)

The infant life protection provisions of the Health Act 1898 sought to regulate the practice of looking after other people's babies for profit.

- [Infant Life Protection Act 1905, Queensland \(1905 - 1966\)](#)

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