

In Moral Danger

c. 1939 – c. 1980

Other Names: • IMD

Details

In Moral Danger (sometimes abbreviated as IMD) was a term in common use in government departments and welfare agencies in the twentieth century. It referred to one of the categories of a 'child in need of care and protection' under the various child welfare acts in Australian states and territories. Being 'exposed to moral danger' was largely used for the committal of girls, although it did apply to some boys.

The exact meaning of the phrase in moral danger varied, depending on who was accusing the child of being endangered. Sometimes it meant a girl was sexually active, at risk of sexual abuse or had been sexually assaulted. It could also mean a child was exposed to crime or prostitution. Sometimes it meant the family of a child was judged as being involved in illegal or immoral activity, living in a rough environment such as a miner's camp or associated with different racial groups, such as Aboriginal or Chinese people. Single mothers were also regularly accused of exposing their children to moral danger, simply because they were unmarried. Single fathers could be accused of exposing their children to moral danger simply because there were no women present in the home.

Many of the young women charged with being in moral danger were victims, not offenders. Some young women had the experience of reporting to police that they had been sexually assaulted, only to be charged with being exposed to moral danger and committed to institutions such as [Winlaton Youth Training Centre](#) in Melbourne. One woman whose story was published in 1974 spoke about young women who were sent to the [Metropolitan Girls' Shelter](#) in Glebe, New South Wales: " ... a lot of of kids that were in there had been raped and a couple of girls by their fathers. That's the most common thing they were in there for – exposed to moral danger" (*Tharunka*, 1974, p.28).

In moral danger was still being used to commit young women to out of home care in the early 1980s in New South Wales. The annual report of the Department of Community Services for 1980-81 stated that of the 220 females committed to training schools, only 40 were committed for statutory offences, the remainder were committed for non-statutory offences such as being 'uncontrollable' or 'exposed to moral danger' (p.26).

Children and young people who came into 'care' after being deemed in moral danger or likely to lapse into a career of vice or crime were sometimes described as status offenders, because they had not committed crimes.

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- [Investigation of the care and treatment of "socially maladjusted teenage girls", Sub-Committee of the Tasmanian Branch of the Australian Institute of Welfare Officers \(c. 1975\)](#)

Related Glossary Terms

- [Status Offender](#)

Related Legislation

- [Children's Welfare Act 1954, Victoria \(1955 - 1959\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Act 1939, New South Wales \(1939 - 1987\)](#)
- [Child Welfare Act 1960, Tasmania \(1960 - 2003\)](#)

Resources

- Arnold, Ann, [Exposed to Moral Danger](#), 19 July 2009
- Robb, Wilma, [Forgotten Australians: Wilma's Story - 'No eye contact'](#), Forgotten Australians: Life Stories, 2011
- Watson, Vanessa, [Parramatta Girls: 'exposed to moral danger'](#), Parramatta Sun, 8 May 2014
- Laurent, Nicola, [The Starting Point](#), Find & Connect web resource blog, 14 August 2015
- Biggs, Barbara, *In moral danger: a true story*, 2003
- Hamilton, Madeleine, [Abused girls' institution trauma](#), Eureka Street, 4 August 2013
- Giles, Maree, [Writing trauma](#), Overland, 2016

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