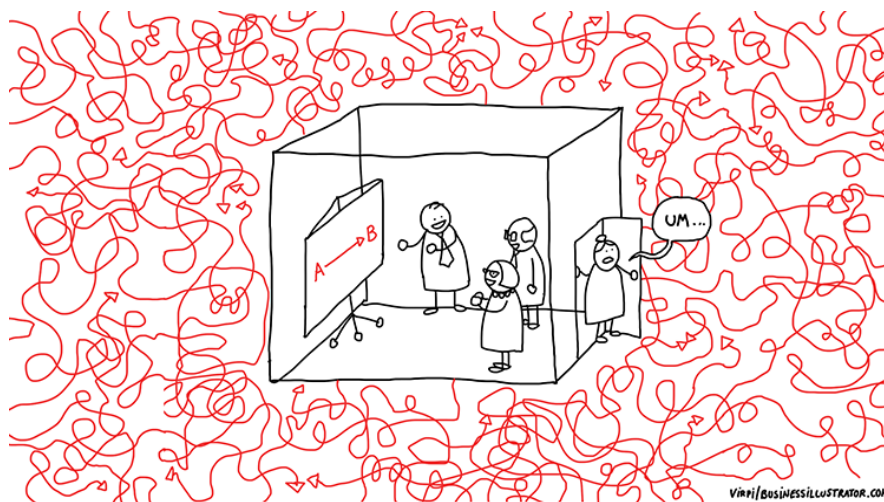




National Centre for Excellence in Residential Child Care

The Polycrisis that is Residential Child Care today

Successful problem solving requires finding the right solution to the right problem. We fail more often because we solve the wrong problem than because we get the wrong solution to the right problem. Russell L. Ackoff

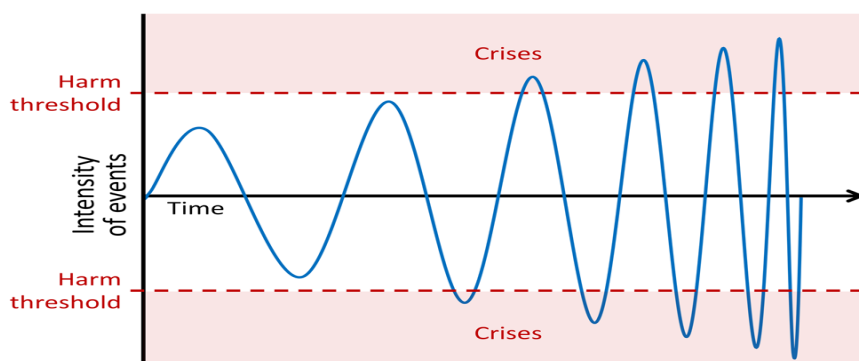


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The Polycrisis that is Residential Child Care today

In the trend towards smaller homes what we are being confronted by is a symptomatic and emergent phenomenon. This requires tools to understand¹.

Recent experience - crisis amplification and acceleration.



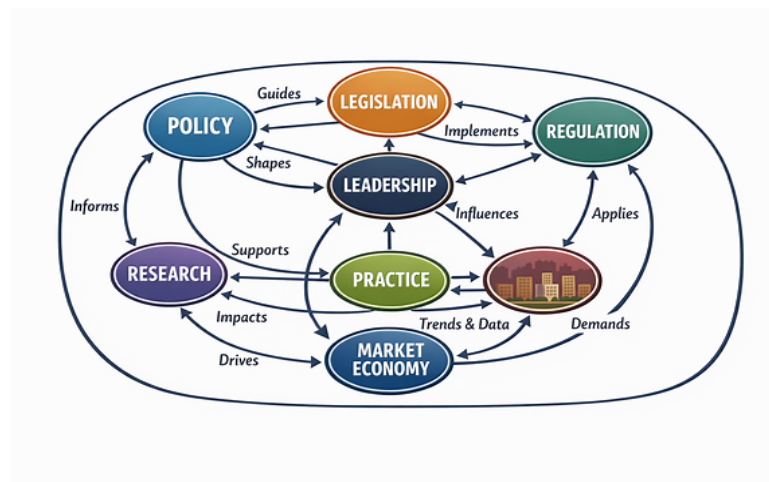
¹ See [Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement | Global Sustainability | Cambridge Core](#)

The wave's increasing amplitude (increasing height and depth of peaks) and increasing frequency (decreasing space between peaks) represent, respectively, the amplification and acceleration of system perturbations. Event peaks that pass certain harm thresholds that are normatively defined by society (represented by the red dotted lines) constitute crises. Crises are not just amplifying and accelerating, they also appear to be *synchronising*.

The polycrisis concept is a valuable tool for understanding ongoing crises, generating actionable insights, and opening avenues for future thinking and activity.

Following Donella Meadows and Diana Wright ([Reference Meadows and Wright2008](#)), a system is a collection of *elements* whose *connections* create some sort of *whole* with its own qualities.

Identifiable elements of the polycrisis are shown in the diagram below (there may be more...).



To fully operationalise the concept a substantive definition is required and in doing so highlighted is its value-addedness in comparison to other more limited and limiting approaches, and leads towards a theoretical framework to explain the causal mechanisms currently entangling children's residential child care, and children's social care more generally.

In this framework, a crisis arises when one or more fast-moving trigger events combines with slow-moving stresses to push a system out of its established equilibrium and into a volatile and harmful state of disequilibrium. The Care Review might be seen as destabilising the system generally. As it largely left Residential Child Care unaddressed it did not make another Residential Child Care possible².

² [Ten Tests for the Care Review – NCERCC](#)

Error or imbalance in the basic institutional constitution of the system leads to structural inevitability³

The more efficient you are at doing the wrong thing, the wronger you become. It is much better to do the right thing wronger than the wrong thing righter. If you do the right thing wrong and correct it, you get better. **Russell L. Ackoff**

Three causal pathways can be identified, common stresses, domino effects, and inter-systemic feedbacks, these connect in multiple co-occurring interrelated ways across systems to produce a synchronised crisis.

Conventional risk assessment focuses on the likelihood and potential harm of particular events such as a car accident, fire, or bankruptcy. In contrast, systemic risk assessment focuses on 'the risk or probability of breakdowns in an entire system, as opposed to breakdowns in individual parts or components, [as] evidenced by co-movements (correlations) among most or all parts'⁴

In a 2024 elaboration of the polycrisis concept adopts two core implications of this systemic risk idea

1. Intra-systemic impact: A disruption that affects one part or area of a single system quickly spreads to disturb the entire system (via multiple, ramifying chains of cause and effect, or some form of contagion, through the system's causal network).
2. Inter-systemic impact: The disruption of the initial system may spill outside that system's boundaries to disrupt other systems.

A polycrisis is the simultaneous occurrence of several, interconnected, and catastrophic crises that amplify one another, producing a combined impact far greater than the sum of their parts. This concept implies that systems are so intertwined that failures cascade, causing persistent, systemic disruption rather than isolated, temporary events.

Summary so far

Core Components of a Polycrisis

- **Interconnectedness:** Distinct shocks (e.g. policy review, budget stringency, profits, attributed outcomes reinforce one another
- **Compound Effects:** The collective impact is larger and more dangerous than individual problems, creating a "whole that is more

³ [Theses on the Transformation of Children's Care Commissioning – NCERCC](#)

⁴ (Kaufman & Scott, [Reference Kaufman and Scott2003](#), p. 371).

- **Complexity:** There is no single cause and no single solution, making management difficult⁵.⁶ There is no 'concise diagnosis and effective therapy' sequence.

Some key drivers and examples in Residential Child Care

- **Environmental & Ecological:** policy, regulation, funding change, market economy and profits, loss of practice and provision loss (social ecology).
- **Political & Social:** overlong family and community-based placements as result of ideological and financial thresholds combining with social and financial inequality, poverty, deprivation exacerbating totals of unmet needs resulting from trauma, abuse.
- **Economic & Value:** 'Fiscal rules', inflation, stressed local authority finances stressing price v quality, VFM, within social care colonised by commodification and marketisation of needs and placements highlights risk mitigation to secure return on investment, care as exchange rather than use value, as private rather than common public good

Properties of systems that enable polycrises

These systems exhibit five key properties that help generate polycrises while hampering crisis mitigation.

- **Multiple causes:** The operation of many causes simultaneously makes cause and effect relationships difficult to trace and presents decisionmakers with acute policy trade-offs. Causes may also interact synergistically so that their combined effects are qualitatively different than the sum of effects they would have separately⁷.
- **Non-linearity:** Complex systems exhibit nonlinear behaviour – that is, perturbations of such systems can produce disproportionately large (or small) changes in the system's behaviour. An important source of nonlinearity is the existence of multiple stable states or equilibria that are separated by thresholds. A system can flip from one equilibrium to another (a critical transition or tipping event) when feedbacks in key processes that sustain the system's equilibrium shift from negative to positive – i.e., from self-dampening to self-reinforcing causal loops⁸. Tipping events can also result from interactions between adjacent systems⁹

⁵ See [Human Learning Systems](#) for engagement and critique of current commissioning and new public management generally

⁶ See page 83 for causal loop addressing complexity [Human Learning Systems: Public Service for the Real World](#)

⁷ (Jervis, [Reference Jervis1997](#)).

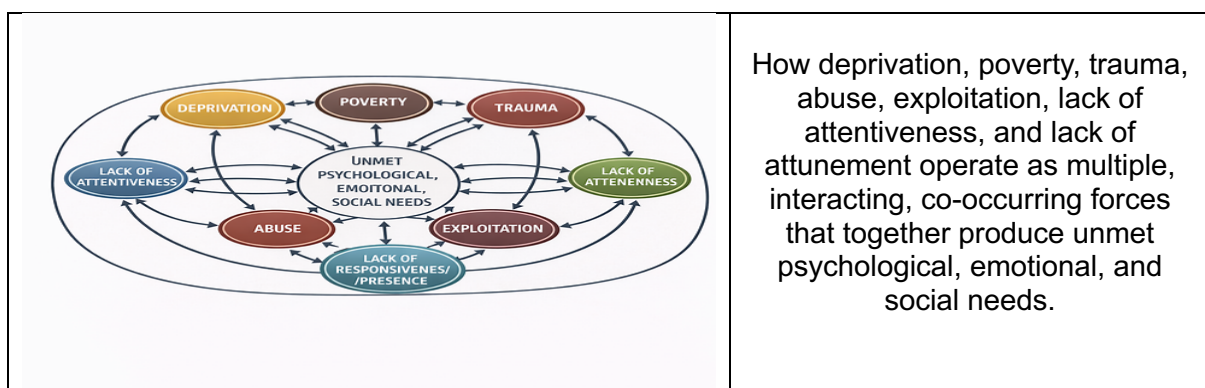
⁸ (Scheffer, [Reference Scheffer2009](#))

⁹ (Rocha et al., [Reference Rocha, Peterson, Bodin and Levin2018](#)).

- Hysteresis: System flips are generally not reversible; a return to the previous system equilibrium is often impossible.
- Boundary permeability: Casual processes operate on multiple time scales within and among natural, social, and technological systems; they cross boundaries of administrative and political units and social sectors, while requiring integrated knowledge from diverse disciplines.
- 'Black swan' outcomes: The probability of such situations are rarely normal and often extreme requiring being addressed over the long term. Policy makers and leaders, in contrast, face institutional pressures to concentrate on immediate and probable risks.

These five properties create deep uncertainty that profoundly hinders effective management of outcomes.

Because risks arising within complex systems tend to transcend administrative, social, and scientific boundaries, they often exceed individuals and groups of managers' professional expertise and are consequently downplayed (in this case examples, policy tweaks, economies through attenuation of family/community based placements, absence or limited assessment of need as response to knowledge the needs will be high, multiple, co-occurring, interacting, short term reduction of high cost placement leading to cost highest crisis intervention then longer high cost placement) or even ignored (budget overruns). And when crises affect multiple administrative and political domains, actors may choose to free ride on others' investments in solutions(in this case example, regional care co-operatives as solution to system failure, after regional commissioning). Finally, deep uncertainty fosters competing policy prescriptions, aggravating a pernicious loss of trust in governments' problem-solving capacity.



Avoiding polycrisis

Avoiding polycrisis requires the re-engagement of system stewardship, holding and containment, by the sector for the sector repairing its removal, in ways not imagined

by the current government Reset policy and plan. Progress cannot be made until this re-engagement occurs.