Rise in juvenile suicides in Britain's prisons

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The suicide and attempted suicide of two 17-year-olds whilst serving sentences in young offenders' institutions has again drawn attention to the issue of the ill treatment of young prisoners in Britain.

On August 1, Philip Griffin from Leeds killed himself in Wetherby young offender's institution. He had been abandoned by his family and was serving a 10-month sentence for theft, burglary and robbery. This was despite warnings from his lawyer, Mark Pritchard, that he would not be able to cope with life inside. Questions are being raised about reports written while Griffin was in remand at Doncaster prison, which said he was adapting well to prison life. Pritchard is also representing a 15-year-old being held on remand at Doncaster who rings him every day saying he is being bullied and does not think he can survive.

A second case involves a young man who tried to hang himself last week whilst in Feltham, Britain's largest young offenders' institution. He is currently on a life support machine. This latest tragedy led to the high profile resignation of Ian Thomas, deputy governor of the jail's Juvenile Centre, in protest at the appalling conditions to which young offenders are subjected.

Thomas told the press that the attempted suicide was the last straw: “The picture of a 17-year-old on a life support machine made the point conclusively for me. This was the ultimate consequence of continuing to house children in accommodation not intended for juvenile use. The number of juvenile prisoners nationally appears to have caught all by surprise.... The governor was saying a couple of weeks ago that we are not taking any more inmates but was ordered to take more by the Prison Service headquarters.”

Because of a shortage of beds, 105 offenders aged between 15 and 17 were being kept locked in cells for up to 22 hours a day. They were also housed in wings for older offenders. “The conditions they are being kept in are more suitable to a Dickens novel than the twenty-first century. Think about warehousing vulnerable, damaged children in the most dire of accommodation, with no constructive regime and poor staffing levels. It doesn't take a genius to work out the possible tragic consequences of such an approach,” Thomas said.

Following Griffin's suicide, the Children's Society charity and the Howard League for Penal Reform are to renew their campaign to persuade the government to abandon the practice of locking up young people under 18. Since 1995, at least 26 people have committed suicide in young offender's institutions, more than twice the number over the previous five years. Last year alone eight young people killed themselves in prison. Sharon Moore, who runs the Children's Society remand project, said, “These places have become a dumping ground for some of the most vulnerable young people in our society. Prison just brutalises and isolates them.”

This is not the first time that conditions at Feltham have been under public attack. In March 1999, Chief Inspector of Prisons Sir David Ramsbotham issued a scathing report on conditions at Feltham, saying they were “totally unacceptable in a civilised country”. He described the care of boys under 18 and those on remand as “institutionalised deprivation”.

Ramsbotham said that the conditions in which young people were held breached the government's obligations under the 1989 Children's Act and the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child—to be treated with humanity and respect. As well as only having two hours a day outside their cells, they were forced to sleep on dirty mattresses and to wear the same underwear for a week. Whilst some changes have been made at Feltham, conditions have not substantially improved for young prisoners. They still only have an average of 15 hours of activity a week, and full-time education is available for only 90 inmates, leaving 700 with no educational provision.

Current legislation in Britain allows young people under the age of 21 to be kept under lock and key, either on remand or following sentencing, in young offender's institutions and Local Authority secure units. Young offenders' institutions are run like adult prisons. The regime is similar and they are kept in the same numbers,

between 60 and 70 to a wing, with four or five prison officers.

Secure units house much younger children, and until recently have been run by Local Authorities. They are much smaller discreet establishments, where supposedly more humane treatment is given and children also receive an education. Psychiatric treatment is on hand where necessary. These facilities are now full to bursting point.

Since April this year, the Youth Justice Board has decided which type of establishment a young person should attend. In theory this should be the one that is most appropriate to their needs and is closer to their home, facilitating family visits. But because there are now so many in the youth custody system there is a shortage of suitable places.

Often new inmates are subject to ritual humiliation on their arrival. Jan Chown, a worker at a West Midlands young offenders' institution, told the *Observer* newspaper that younger boys were forced to shout nursery rhymes from the windows of their cells to identify them for future bullying.

17-year-olds are now effectively treated as adults within the criminal justice system and increasingly end up in jails. Francis Crook of the Howard League said this is common: “There are simply too many kids in the system, and so they end up being stockpiled in prisons. The number of children in secure units has risen from 200 to 400 over the last year. More children will die if this continues.”

Both the current Labour government and its Conservative predecessors bear responsibility for the present crisis. A decade ago, the Conservatives pledged to end imprisonment for 15 and 16 year-olds when it introduced new criminal justice legislation. Section 60 of the 1991 Criminal Justice Act outlawed the imprisonment on remand of 15 and 16 year-olds, but a subsequent section said the practice could continue if there was not enough space in Local Authority secure accommodation. Since there has never been enough suitable space for young offenders outside prisons, the incarceration of children has continued.

In spite of growing concerns about the appalling conditions in prisons, and the rise in the prison population as a whole, criminal justice legislation affecting young people has become increasingly punitive. In line with the regressive social policy passed in the 1980s and 1990s, there was a shift away from seeking to reform and rehabilitate young people who had committed crimes. Austere regimes were introduced in “boot camps” designed to give young offenders a “short, sharp, shock”. The 1994 Criminal Justice and Public Order Act doubled the maximum custodial sentence within young offenders' institutions. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act added to the punitive character of legislation dealing with young offenders.

While the number of young people in custody continued to rise, government policy claimed “prison works”. There are now twice as many children aged 15 to 17 in prison than in the early 1990s and nine out of ten will re-offend on their release. A survey of those held in young offender establishments found that 40 percent had not achieved the writing and numeracy level expected of an average 11 year-old, while nearly a third had not reached that level for reading.

The situation is even worse for the adult prison population. This has increased by 25,000 in the last 10 years to 65,000. Since Labour took office in 1997 an additional 6,000 have been gaoled, making the numbers imprisoned per head of population the highest in Europe after Portugal. Home Secretary Jack Straw has said this will continue to rise “for the foreseeable future”. The average length of prison sentence is rising, as is the proportion of offenders being sent into custody.

Concerns have also been expressed recently at the alarming increase in adult prison suicides; 53 have occurred already this year and the number could rise to over 90. More than 20 percent of male inmates have tried to take their lives at some point before being sent to prison. The numbers of those with mental health problems being sent to prison has increased sevenfold since the introduction of “care in the community” policies, cutting back on specialist psychiatric provisions.