Asian youth murdered by psychotic racist in British young offenders institution

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The conviction of 20-year-old Robert Stewart on November 1 for the murder of 19 year old Zahid Mubarak at the Feltham Young Offenders Institution last March highlights the brutal character of juvenile detention in Britain as well as the criminalisation of a growing number of disturbed and alienated youth.

Mubarak was battered to death by his cellmate, Stewart , only hours before he was due to be released. He was serving a 90-day sentence for a minor £6 theft and interfering with an automobile.

Stewart was known to hold extreme racist views. He had written a series of racist letters to friends before the attack on Mubarak. In one he threatened to kill his cellmate. He had also written racist graffiti on the wall of his cell. The prison censors had intercepted some of these letters, but still nothing was done to separate Stewart from Mubarak.

The prison authority's responsibility for the terrible killing of a young Asian man is all too apparent, but this is only one side of the story. For Stewart is also a victim of official indifference and incompetence.

In care from the age of 14, Stewart was inducted into the prison service as soon as he was old enough—receiving his first custodial sentence aged 15. Over the next five years Stewart became institutionalised, losing any points of reference other than prison life. His case file was filled with evidence of a serious mental disorder: flooding his cell, setting fire to his cell, setting fire to himself, and other attempts at suicide. There was no attempt to provide Steward with therapy, let alone try to rehabilitate him. Instead the documented incidents of Stewart's violence and self-abuse were simply described as “strange” by prison staff.

With these facts in mind, Mubarak's brutal murder was clearly a tragedy waiting to happen.

Stewart was found guilty of murder just week after the decision by Britain's highest judge, Lord Chief Justice Woolf, that Jon Venables and Robert Thompson—the two boys convicted in 1993 of the murder of toddler Jamie Bulger—could be freed early next year. The two, aged just 11 at the time of their sentencing, are currently held under the authority of social services in secure detention, but have had access to therapy and educational provision. In law the two should be transferred to an adult prison when they become 18 years old, but many involved in the prison service have expressed concern that conditions in jails would rapidly undo all the progress they had made.

Woolf had drawn the same conclusion in reaching his decision on Thompson's and Venables release. The “corrosive atmosphere” in Britain's adult prison system was a significant factor in his decision, he explained.

Feltham is a prime example that this corrosive atmosphere extends throughout Britain's penal system to youth detention institutions.

In August the deputy governor of Feltham, Ian Thomas, resigned over the “Dickensian conditions” its inmates endured. This followed the attempted suicide of a 17-year-old inmate. The youth should have been placed in a unit for under 18-year-olds, but overcrowding meant he was forced to stay with older offenders.

In March 1999, the chief Inspectors of prisons, Sir David Ramsbotham, attacked the conditions at Feltham as totally unacceptable. He described the care of boys under 18 and those on remand as “institutionalised deprivation”. There have been more than 5,000 prisoner-on-prisoner assaults in the last 10 years and seven suicides within the institution. Feltham has had four governors in six months.

Despite a review of procedures and investment in the

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institution following Ramsbotham's remarks, a further investigation revealed that young prisoners were still spending too long in their cells. The average amount of activity time for those detained is just 15 hours per week. Full time education was only available for 90 inmates out of almost 800.

In the healthcare unit, inspectors warned that 18 of 23 staying there had such huge problems that they should be in hospital not prison. The chief medical inspector on the team said they were the most “seriously mentally disturbed group of young men” he had ever come across.

Peter Misch, a forensic psychologist specialising in adolescent behaviour, worked at the Feltham healthcare unit for three years. He said, “The level of emotional and psychiatric disturbance is enormous; it was mind bogglingly high. People who were acutely psychotic were locked up for 23-and-a-half-hours a day. There was a lack of resources, no integral sanitation in the medical wing, which rendered it filthy at times. And you have to bear in mind the basic brutality of banging up 15 year olds. Episodes of violence were depressingly frequent, we saw endemic self-harm and 25 hanging attempts in a single week.”

Conditions at Feltham are the outcome of the frenzied law and order campaign pursued by the former Conservative government and now by Labour. Britain's prison population currently stands 65,000. More than six out of 10 prisons in England and Wales are overcrowded, with some holding twice as many inmates than they were designed for. This includes Young Offenders Institutions, all of whom are presently at almost double capacity.

The number of suicides in jails has risen to a record high. Ninety-one inmates killed themselves in 1999, more than 10 percent up on the 82 deaths in 1998. The suicides included four young prisoners aged 18 and under, 15 aged 19-21 and five women. Sixty-two percent of people committing suicide were on remand awaiting trial.

The number of girls sent to prison increased by 382 percent between 1992 and 1998. As the rate of offending by girls during this period dropped by a quarter, huge increase in the number's being incarcerated is clearly the result of a more punitive sentencing policy.

Two years ago the first “child jail” (Secure Training Centre) for 12-14 year olds was opened by the private firm, Medway. Labour had dubbed such institutions as “colleges of crime” when in opposition. Since taking office, however, Home Secretary Jack Straw has announced that another five will be built—only changing the name of the sentencing procedure from a “Secure training order” to a “detention and training order”.

Before the secure training orders were introduced, children under 15 could only be imprisoned for the most serious crimes, like murder and manslaughter. There has been an 11 percent increase in the number of children between the ages of 12 and 17 in detention in the last year, as magistrates embrace the detention and training orders. This situation can only lead to more tragic cases, such as that of Zahid Mubarak.

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