

Britain: Teenager commits suicide in prison

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On March 24, 15-year-old Joseph Scholes hung himself after spending only nine days in the Stoke Heath Young Offender Institution. The events surrounding his tragic death highlight the brutal nature of the Labour government's "get tough" policy on young offenders and its attitude to the social problems facing young people in general.

Joseph was a disturbed and alienated teenager. Just four months earlier he had tried to commit suicide after a period of personal trauma. His life was in turmoil. His parents had gone through an acrimonious divorce and he had allegedly been the victim of sexual abuse by a member of his father's family. Prescribed Prozac, Joseph had been visiting a psychiatrist for months, during which time a custody battle was raging in court.

Finally on November 2001, Joseph tried to kill himself by taking an overdose and jumping out a window. Clearly in a very distressed state he started to fight with the ambulance staff. Unbelievably he was hauled off to court and convicted of affray.

In December Joseph entered voluntary care at a children's home in Sale, Manchester. According to reports, in the home Joseph slashed his face over 30 times with a knife. The *Observer* newspaper reported that one cut was down to the bone, and there was so much blood that the room had to be repainted. Four days later Joseph was arrested for robbery, found guilty and sentenced to two years detention.

The governor of Stoke Heath Young Offender Institution told the *Observer* that Joseph was not a thief and that he believed the boy had played only a small role in the offences he was charged with. Yvonne Scholes, Joseph's mother, said: "Joe told me he pleaded guilty because he couldn't take any more. At that stage, he was so ill in his head; he just wanted it to be over. I still don't know how they could lock up a boy who had all these things happen to him."

The death of Joseph has been met with a wall of

silence. Apart from a few brief columns in the *Guardian* and *Observer*, the untimely death of a young boy has barely been reported, let alone any of the serious and disturbing issues posed by the tragedy debated. Even a cursory look at the circumstances of Joseph's death can only expose the policies of a government that is callous and indifferent to the problems afflicting the most vulnerable in society.

Joseph's mother said, "The day he was sentenced, I knew he was going to die. You don't get a death sentence for murder. Why should a child get one for robbery?"

How a child undergoing psychiatric treatment and known to have suicidal tendencies could be locked up defies every principle of justice. Yet Joseph's death is the direct result of Labour's "law and order" campaign, a government whose sole response to the deepening social polarisation is incarceration.

Scholes was the third youngster to take his life this year. The Howard League has produced horrifying statistics on tragic outcome of Labour's law and order offensive (www.web.ukonline.co.uk/howard.league). Four 16-year olds have committed suicide in prison since January 2000. In the last 10 years, 18 children have killed themselves in prisons and there were 554 incidents of self-harm between April 2000 and November 2001.

When Labour came into office, it claimed that it would be "tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime". Whilst it has zealously defended the first plank of its policy, locking up more people than ever before: on the causes of crime—poverty, inequality and social exclusion—its policies have only served to deepen the social divide.

Anne Owers, the chief inspector of prisons, found that whilst "it was expected that youths in custody might be among the most disadvantaged in the country, the extent of the deficits revealed during the course of

the inspections alarmed even the inspectors, familiar with the needs of this group.” According to Owers, half of the young people in detention had previously been in local authority care and “73 percent described their educational attainment as nil”. A 1998 study, *Wasted Lives*, by the prison reform group Nacro (National Association for the Care and Rehabilitation of Offenders), reported that young prisoners were very likely to have suffered deprivation of all kinds, including physical and sexual abuse and mental illness.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child defines children as any person less than 18 years of age. But under Labour, 17-year-olds are effectively treated as adults by the criminal justice system. The government ignored the advice of the Chief Inspector of Prisons—who in 1997 published a damning report on conditions and treatment of young people in jail—that those below 18 years of age should not be held in the prison system.

Under its 1998 Crime and Disorder Act, Labour built on the punitive character of previous Tory legalisation in dealing with young offenders. In 1993, 4,200 children were sentenced to immediate custody. By 1999 this had risen to 7,000—an increase of 67 percent. Similarly, the length of sentences handed out to children has increased from an average of 8.6 months in 1993 to 11.4 months in 1999.

The government recently announced that hundreds of children currently on bail pending trial would be remanded in custody in the future. More than £6 million a month is to be spent on creating “secure cells” for children, and certain prisons or prison wings are to be designated for under-eighteens.

Frances Crook, director of the Howard League, said, “Locking up children for short periods whilst they await trial is a failed policy that will lead to more crime and misery.” The league has taken the government to court over the fact that children were not being protected from bullying, assault and self-harm.



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