Britain: Youth prison accused of abuses

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At the beginning of December the Howard League for Penal Reform accused Stoke Heath Young Offenders Institution, one of Britain's largest youth prisons with space for 690 inmates, of abusing the human rights of young offenders.

The Howard League's main criticism was concerned with the use of strip cells by the staff of Stoke Heath. Fran Russell, assistant director of the charity, said she believed the cells were unlawful under the Human Rights Act. She added that the charity was pursuing a number of cases that could end in litigation. "The cells are very bare ... no natural light, no furniture, and just a hard plastic plinth to sleep on. There's no in-cell sanitation and the youths are quite often stripped of clothes and given a quilted jacket. If you treated a child like this in any other part of the country it would be considered child abuse and social services would move in to remove a child from such conditions to a place of safety."

The Prison Service later admitted that inmates displaying "extreme behaviour" at young offenders institutions were being left to calm down in cells with no natural light, furniture or toilet until their behaviour became "manageable". There are two such cells at Stoke Heath that are located in the segregation unit. They argued that this was limited to very rare situations where the youths concerned needed to be protected from themselves, that they were not placed in strip conditions and only kept in the cell for a few hours.

The Howard League countered that it believed children were being kept in isolation cells for several days at a time and had recently received allegations of a young person being held in one for five days earlier this year. Ms Russell concluded, "It is used as punishment. It does nothing to help them. It's all about controlling them and not dealing with the trauma that lays behind this behaviour."

The situation in young offenders institutions is appalling and has a devastating impact on vulnerable young people. Most surveys suggest between one third and one half of all youths under 18 experience bullying in youth prisons. According to a report by the Howard League from 1995 there were almost 400 suicides amongst the overall prison population of England and Wales. The numbers for intended suicides and incidents of self-harm are much higher. Between 1993-1994 there were a total 4187 incidents of self-harm, of which 825 were with suicidal intent.

After the damning criticisms by the Howard League, the *Observer* ran an article in its December 13 edition defending Stoke Heath prison staff. Stoke Heath's acting governor, Peter Small, invited the *Observer* to visit the institution. In the process of denying that abuses had taken place, however, what emerged is a more devastating indictment of the entire system dealing with young offenders.

The report argued that such instances of isolating young prisoners that had occurred were made necessary by the psychological state of those concerned. It draws the conclusion: "In a day of unrestricted access, the only abuse that was visible did not concern conditions at the prison, nor its rules or regime. The real scandal was that some of its inmates—suffering from acute mental illness, or handicapped by severe learning difficulties—had been sent there at all."

The *Observer* describes the most horrific incidents of self-harm. The article was headlined, "A boy eats his own flesh in desperation: the reality of life inside our juvenile jails." This refers to a juvenile prisoner who cut his arm, then inserted the points of pencils, which he drove into the length of his forearms and then started to gnaw at his wounds whenever he was not restrained in an attempt to remove and devour his own tendons and blood vessels.

Another prisoner, Anthony, is 20 years of age. His favourite method of self-harm consists of wrapping

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layers of toilet paper around his arms, then setting them on fire.

The *Observer* quotes charge nurse Wendy Cooper saying that 92 percent of Stoke Heath's young offenders have some kind of mental health problem. The article suggests that since the number of Britain's prisoners has almost doubled since 1992, for significant numbers of the most vulnerable and disturbed, prison has become a social service of last resort. According to David Watlington, who has overall responsibility for the 2,600 juveniles in Prison Service custody, 43 percent have been in care with a similar proportion victim of "neglect, family criminality, bad parenting, and psychological trauma."

It is difficult to establish without a proper investigation into the situation at Stoke Heath whether individual prison staff have acted wrongly, or even criminally. But there is a great deal of truth in what the *Observer* argues. Without seeking to in any way legitimise barbaric practices such as isolating young people in cells, one can still understand how overworked prison staff—untrained in dealing with severe psychological and emotional trauma—would possibly resort to such measures. Though it is essential to condemn and root out such practices, to do so is clearly not enough. One must also ask why they occur at all. Then the finger of blame must be pointed elsewhere—at those responsible for the draconian law and order measures that mean so many troubled young people are treated as criminals rather than being offered any help with the social and psychological problems that have led them to break the law.

For decades now the present Labour government and its Conservative predecessors have presided over an unprecedented redistribution of wealth from the poor to the very rich. They have denied millions of young people the chance of a proper education and a decent job at the end of it. This is the real crime that is perpetrated against society—and which is ultimately responsible for the brutalisation of tens of thousands of young people.

The resulting growth in poverty has helped break up families and encouraged all the problems associated with social deprivation, including psychological conditions associated with feelings of depression and lack of self-worth and—inevitably—various forms of usually petty criminal behaviour. Yet only crime is paid any real attention. In order to cope with the fallout from their own divisive economic and social policies, the powers to be resort to ever harsher forms of repression and punishment. As a result, while essential services such as education, welfare and health are starved of finances those who would have been helped by them instead find themselves behind bars where they are subject to inappropriate and often degrading and damaging treatment.

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