

Report reveals systematic brutality against child offenders in Britain

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The Children's Rights Alliance for England (CRAE) has revealed the brutal regime facing children held in privately run Secure Training Centres (STCs).

The charity's main concerns are the restraint methods and "distraction" techniques authorised by the Physical Control in Care (PCC) manual used within the centres.

The CRAE's report catalogues the widespread abuse suffered by some of the most vulnerable children in society. The restraint methods contained in the manual are approved by the Ministry of Justice. They inflict deliberate pain and humiliation upon children and can result in permanent injury and even death. The CRAE condemns such methods as entirely unnecessary and raises the issue that they may be tantamount to torture and in violation of human rights law.

The manual contains methods that are derived from those used against adult prisoners. Throughout the manual there are warnings that the methods can result in "fracture to the skull" and "temporary or permanent blindness", which CRAE says is an example of "state authorisation of institutionalised child abuse".

So disturbing is the report that the STCs and the former Labour government went to extraordinary lengths in order to obstruct CRAE's attempts to uncover the information and its campaign for child protection. The report follows a five-year battle by CRAE against the Youth Justice Board (YJB) and the Home Office to request the data under the Freedom of Information Act. The full disclosure of the PCC manual and other data from Freedom of Information requests confirmed CRAE's contention that there has been an "institutional culture of systematically using unlawful force on children with the intention of causing pain".

CRAE's campaign to expose the abuse began as a result of the Carlile Inquiry in 2005 following the death of 15-year-old Gareth Myatt the previous year at Rainsbrook STC, and the suicide of 14-year-old Adam Rickwood in

2004 at Hassockfield STC.

Gareth Myatt died as a result of a PCC approved hold—the seated double embrace (SDE)—which resulted in asphyxia from the inhalation of his gastric contents. The hold involves two staff members holding the youth's upper body and pushing the torso forwards towards the knees with one officer holding the head. The SDE was suspended in June 2004 after a police investigation.

Adam Rickwood committed suicide a month after being moved to an STC, 116 miles away from his family and from residential care that had closed due to a lack of funding. On arrival he had already written a letter informing his mother that he would commit suicide.

The evening of his suicide, Adam had been subjected to a PCC authorised technique called "nose distraction", which involves pushing the base of the nose up towards the crown of the head. This "distraction" often angers a child, leading to the use of brutal restraint methods. Once in his cell Adam was so distressed he smeared blood across the walls before hanging himself.

After Adam's death ministers assured CRAE that this technique had been discontinued in STCs. However, a similar technique continues to this day in other Youth Offending Institutions that currently account for 86 percent of children held in custody. According to a government commissioned review, the technique also continues "unaccountably".

Following the deaths of Myatt and Rickwood, CRAE carried out interviews with children in 2005 that revealed a catalogue of painful experiences of nose, thumb and rib "distractions". Subsequent inquests found that in all of the four existing STCs, between 2004 and 2006 the restraint methods, which are only supposed to be used as a last resort, were used between 2,000 and 4,000 times a year. This was despite all four STCs having no more than 301 children at any one time.

A 2007 inquest revealed that the distraction techniques

were used an average four times a week in each centre, resulting in 51 injuries such as persistent nasal pain and bleeding noses. The inquest revealed a violent culture within STCs, with staff nicknaming each other “clubber”, “crusher” and “mauler”. Children described how their faces were smacked against surfaces, staff placed fingers up their noses and pulled until it felt like the nose would be ripped off and their eyes went bloodshot. It was also found that children who suffer asthma were typically subjected to having their heads pushed below their hearts, prompting asthma attacks. When children complained about staff abuse they were told that no rules were being broken.

The inquest found that these methods of “last resort” supposedly to prevent harm to children, staff or property when no other alternative was available were being used for petty offences. In one case a child was restrained for refusing to leave an enjoyable lesson.

Privately run centres responsible for the training, education and rehabilitation of repeat young offenders between the ages of 12 and 14 were first proposed by Conservative Home Secretary Michael Howard in 1994, as part of the Thatcher government’s privatisation and draconian law-and-order strategies. The centres did not get off the ground after Labour MPs including Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, Jack Straw, and David Blunkett voted against them. However, immediately after Labour came to power in 1997, Home Secretary Straw pushed ahead, claiming that contracts for the first centre in Medway had already been signed. Between 1998 and 1999 three STCs were opened, followed by a later fourth STC, to contain children up to the age of 17.

STCs are an example of the privatisation strategies pursued by Labour through the Private Finance Initiative, which saw public money being funnelled towards private corporations and the government renouncing direct accountability for social provision. The CRAE reports that in 2009 alone the companies running the four STCs received £50 million.

The Youth Justice Board was created by the Labour government in 2000 to take responsibility for children held in custody. During its existence, however, the YJB has systematically ignored the abuses prevalent within STCs and sought to come to the defence of STC directors. Despite concluding that there was limited monitoring of the use of restraint techniques and very little accountability of STCs, the YJB proceeded to recommend a widening of restraint powers for STC staff. It did not begin centrally collecting data on STCs until 2008, and

that was only as a result of CRAE’s inquiries. Following the inquests into restraint methods, the YJB wrote to STC directors assuring them that Straw was working to amend the STC rules in their favour.

Following the attempts by CRAE to request the PCC manual in 2007, the YJB only provided a few selected pages. It was not until May 2010 that more pages were released, but these had been heavily redacted. Headings such as “strangle against the wall”, “hair grab” and “kicks on the floor” without further explanation left CRAE unable to pursue legal proceedings. The full manual was not received until July 2010.

In 2006, CRAE also asked the YJB how restraint methods had been approved and what records had been kept on their use and impact on children. The YJB only sent data from 2006, claiming it had no prior records despite the STCs being obliged to record every use of the methods.

Most telling of all, in 2007 Straw legalised unauthorised methods that had surfaced through investigations and provided staff with even broader powers to restrain. He assured STC directors of the government’s continued support. The bill, which was legally dubious, was quashed in 2008, but ministers rejected demands by CRAE to notify all children in custody and their parents about the changes to the rules, arguing that this “was a matter for establishments”.

The Labour government repeatedly rejected CRAE’s calls for independent inquiries into abuse of children. In 2009 the government used its own commissioned inquiry, which had found evidence of major abuse, to conclude that pain had a role to play in restraint and block further investigation. They assured CRAE that mechanisms had been put in place to protect children in custody, resisting further calls to clarify what these mechanisms were and how they had been implemented. Ministers assured the European Parliament that the methods caused very little pain or discomfort and only for the briefest amount of time, while blocking the Court of Appeals and MPs from accessing the PCC manual.



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