

# Police in Britain illegally arrest thousands of children

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The office of London Mayor Boris Johnson has been forced to reveal that young people aged 17 and under had been held in police cells over 3,000 times in London toward the first half of last year.

Between November 2014 and May 2015, Scotland Yard recorded 3,005 such cases and 483 children were held over an entire weekend. This is in flagrant violation of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act, which states that children under 18 in custody should be transferred to the care of the local authority and placed in temporary accommodation.

Outside of London, Warwickshire and West Mercia were found by the Inspectorate of Prisons and Constabulary to have held 36 children in cells overnight between May 2014 and May 2015. One 14-year-old who had attempted self-harm prior to his arrest had been placed under insufficient observation and injured himself while in police custody. In Nottingham in 2015, a 16-year-old girl detained under the Mental Health Act was held in a cell for 44 hours without food or water, according to HM Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC).

The illegal detainment of children is well known to the authorities. In 2013, the Howard League for Penal Reform reported that across the country over 40,000 children were detained in police cells overnight in 2011, or 800 young people per week.

Labour Party London Assembly member Andrew Dismore, who obtained the detainment figures, said, “The police tell me that a combination of budget cuts and housing shortages are having a devastating impact on councils’ ability to place young people and prevent them spending the night in a police cell.”

Dismore failed to mention that the Labour Party holds majorities in many of the councils carrying out socially destructive spending cuts. Or that, at the

national level, the Labour Party has repeatedly committed itself to the austerity program driving the cuts. Labour’s Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell stated in the *Guardian*, “Labour under Jeremy Corbyn is committed to eliminating the deficit and creating an economy in which we live within our means.”

The above findings are all the more concerning in light of the recent scandal involving the private security firm G4S and the mistreatment of child prisoners. A BBC *Panorama* investigation found G4S guards at Medway secure training centre (STC) in Kent had regularly falsified reports to cover up violent incidents that would have required the company to pay a fine. Seven members of staff have since been suspended on charges of unnecessary force, including allegations of slapping and punching children.

The Youth Justice Board has temporarily stopped placing children at the offending centre. G4S currently runs Britain’s three STCs at Medway, Oakhill in Milton Keynes and Rainsbrook in Northamptonshire, though Rainsbrook is due to pass over to MTCNovo in May this year.

The company has been involved in a series of incidents over the past few years, in which criminally inadequate levels of care have been revealed. In 2014, 14 children were found to have been assaulted by G4S and Serco guards between 2004 and 2008. 2004 was the year in which Gareth Myatt and Adam Rickwood, aged 15 and 14, died after being unlawfully restrained in Rainsbrook STC.

Responding to the *Panorama* investigation, Andy Burnham, Labour’s shadow home secretary, called for G4S to be stripped of its contracts. For Burnham, the problem is simply a case of unfortunate managerial oversight on the part of a single company. He takes no issue with putting vulnerable young people and their

rehabilitation into the care of the private businesses.

Burnham does not even match the rhetorical stance of former Labour Home Secretary Jack Straw, a right-wing Blairite who, in 1997, declared the introduction of the private sector into the running of prisons “morally repugnant.” This was shortly before Labour’s term in office under Blair, during which the practise of building private prisons was extended under Private Finance Initiative (PFI) schemes and on Straw’s watch.

Prisons run by the British state are not free of serious abuses against children. Cases of violence and neglect have been brought to public attention several times in recent years. In the same year that saw the deaths of Myatt and Rickwood, the *World Socialist Web Site* reported accusations levelled by the Howard League for Penal Reform against Stoke Heath Young Offenders Institution, stating their belief that the youth prison (which held 690 inmates at the time) had been abusing the human rights of young offenders by placing them in isolation cells for days at a time.

Guards at the largest youth prison in Britain, Hindley Young Offenders Institution, were found to have broken bones while restraining inmates on five separate occasions between 2009 and 2011. In 2012, it was revealed, officers at Feltham YOI drew batons over 100 times and used them 25 times.

The use of offensive weapons against children has only become more serious in recent years, with Tasers being drawn on children 431 times in 2013--a 38 percent increase over the previous year--and fired 37 times. These numbers are taken from official Home Office figures. The youngest person to receive a 50,000 volt shock was 14 years old; the youngest threatened was 11. Responding to criticisms, Commander Neil Basu of the Association of Chief Police Officers said, “We have to remember that children can commit violent crime too. The police are paid to intervene in those situations and Taser can be an appropriate use of force.”

While money can be found for the supply of several thousand potentially lethal weapons, the government says there is none to spare to fund youth services that help keep children out of crime. A Freedom of Information Request submitted to the Department for Education in 2014 found that money spent on services for teenagers in England had fallen 36 percent in the previous two years (2011 to 2013). The biggest cuts

came in the London boroughs of Kensington and Chelsea and Tower Hamlets, which cut their spending by 78 percent and 65 percent, respectively. Funding again dropped by 10 percent across the country the following year.

In place of care, education and employment--the resources for which have instead been directed towards big business and war--British capitalism has nothing to offer the youth except violence and repression.

(The author recommends:

Britain: Youth prison accused of abuses

7 January 2004

<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2004/01/pris-j07.html>

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<https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2015/08/20/corb-a20.html>



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