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Short Article

Clear approach: Peer-led approaches in Youth Offender Institutions

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Abstract:

This article undertakes an analysis of His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons' (HMIP) inspection reports of Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) in England over a 20-year period. The analysis is synthesised with the author's lived experience of being both an incarcerated child in YOI and a professional working with children in custody. The analysis was instigated by a letter written by the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) to the Rt Hon Damian Hinds, Minister of State for Justice, indicating that the current state of affairs in England's YOIs is 'positively inhumane.' The current article argues that YOIs have never been 'positively humane', having always fallen short of 'improving outcomes for children', through the lens of recidivism. The author argues that YOIs also overlook peer-led programmes to promote children desisting from offending, through illuminating a growing body of evidence which suggests this approach can provide 'hooks for change' for children to desist from crime, and that it presents a model of good practice that could be used as a child first approach.

Introduction

This article will first explore the current state of Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) in England, before arguing that the use of 'experiential peers' and 'peer mentors' in the youth estate is overlooked as a means to reduce violence and rates of suicide and self-harm. The article firstly examines His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons' (HMIP) report from the year 2000, when I was incarcerated myself in Brinsford YOI. Extrapolating from the historical state of affairs and comparing this with a recent letter written by the Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) to the Rt Hon Damian Hinds, Minister of State for Justice, to call on him to undertake an analysis of effectiveness. The IMB states that YOIs, although dealing with far fewer children than in 2000, require 'urgent action' towards a renewed focus on 'improving outcomes for children' (IMB,



2023). Exploring the data of reoffending rates over this 23-year period, alongside the author's 'lived experience' of childhood incarceration, this paper argues that there is little evidence that YOIs have ever 'improved outcomes' for children entering them. Furthermore, although the pandemic has amplified these issues, many of the challenges highlighted by the IMB are 'business as usual' for the youth estate. The article also draws on literature and my current practice in a YOI to illustrate how the use of 'mentors' and 'peers' is a resource that could positively impact on the experience of child incarceration 'in its current form.'

Historical context

I had just turned 17 years old when incarcerated in Brinsford YOI as a juvenile in January of 1999 for 18 months - along with my 15-year-old brother who was serving a 15-month sentence. Upon arrival at Brinsford YOI at that time, the number of children in custody in England and Wales was approximately 2,700 (Youth Justice Statistics, published 2023 according to site). Several months after I had been released on Home Detention Curfew (HDC) for good behaviour due to being assessed as having a reduced level of *risk*, HM Inspectorates conducted their inspection of Brinsford. In the preface to their report, Sir David Ramsbotham, the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons at the time, stated that 'our inspection, of which this is my report, was one of the most disturbing my team and I have carried out, disclosing a level of neglect and lack of understanding of the needs of young prisoners that was "breath-taking"' (HMIP, 2000, p. 3). In their book *The Penal System 6th Edition* Cavadino et al. (2020) outline that Brinsford was not the only YOI at the time to be called into question. Indeed, in 1999 the conditions at Feltham YOI were described by HMIP as 'unacceptable in a civilised country.' Meanwhile, in the same year, being just as scathing about Portland YOI, describing conditions there to be a 'moral outrage' (Cavadino et al., 2020, p. 289).

As someone who was in Brinsford at the time, these inspection reports came as absolutely no surprise to me at all. It is worth pointing out that I certainly was not reading inspection reports shortly after being released from prison as a child, but I did see reports of a failing YOI on the news which caught my attention, and I found it was my previous place of residence, Brinsford. The reports claimed that conditions in Brinsford were a 'disgrace' and that these conditions were a 'stain' on the prison service (BBC, 2001). Sir David Ramsbotham also stated that it was 'inexcusable' as similar reports had been filed with respect to other YOIs, as highlighted above, and in Brinsford 'last year three inmates took their lives, and there was one death there earlier this year' (BBC, 2001). My memory of Brinsford at the time - although Brinsford no longer holds under 18s - was that violence, self-harm and intimidation were a way of life and 'doing jail well' meant actively participating in the culture of dysregulated children acting up to the role of prisoners, because they were indeed in 'prison.' I would argue that officers at that time had little to no knowledge of youth development or the impact of childhood trauma. I am currently training prison officers in the Unlocked



Graduates scheme and these concepts, alongside trauma-informed practice and child first principles, are central to the prison officers' MSc, especially for those working in the youth estate.

Independent Monitoring Board

The Independent Monitoring Board (IMB), a statutory but independent organisation which monitors prisons' day-to-day practice, recently wrote a letter to Rt Hon Damian Hinds, Minister of State for Justice, outlining that the current state of YOIs is 'positively inhumane' (IMB, 2023, p. 2). They highlight that there are staff shortages, cycles of violence, lack of purposeful activity, and limited educational opportunities across the four YOIs currently operating in England, even though the number of children in custody in May 2023 is 453, which is a reduction of 83% (HMPPS & YCS, 2023). However, I remember being on the enhanced wing (a unit for prisoners with privileges) with a job in the kitchens in Brinsford while my brother, being less fortunate, was on basic (a unit with very few privileges) as he struggled to adapt to the rules and environment of prison. Staff were frequently cancelling our association (time on the wing for phone calls and showers) due to a lack of staffing. I recall frequent suicide attempts, as outlined in the HMIP report, and the level of violence was always high, leading to feelings of anxiety and fear. This does lead me to wonder whether there is a 'crisis' in the youth estate, or whether we are now opening our minds to what we have been doing to children by placing them in establishments run by the prison service.

Another similarity is that there were two main gangs at the time from Birmingham: Burger Bar Crew and Johnson's Crew. Upon arrival, children were asked by staff which gang they affiliated with so they could place children on separate wings along with their affiliated gang members. This is interesting as the IMB report states that YOIs are using 'keep-aparts' (IMB, 2023, p. 4), which is separation. Again, if we look at the evidence from HMIP reports, as well as my own embodied experience, it seems that the crisis we are witnessing here is what has already been conceptualised in literature as the 'crisis of visibility' (see Fitzgerald & Sim, 1982). It has been argued that if the secrecy lingering behind prison walls becomes known to the public, this opening up of the prison's internal functions and harms is 'likely to decrease the legitimacy of the system' and that 'if knowledge is power then there is a danger that the system will lose much of its power if it loses control of information about itself' (Cavadino et al., 2020, p. 21). Therefore, we must question whether the crisis unfolding in 2023 is due to the secrets being exposed, rather than reflecting a significant change in how children are treated. Although I accept that the pandemic has amplified current challenges and staff shortages have become even more of an issue, I think this is more 'business as usual' in responding to the pandemic than a 'crisis' in comparison to common practice. Not that I am playing down the challenges of the youth estate, just to ask what it is we want the youth estate to



be effective at, because if it is to improve outcomes for children maybe we should consider what we have been doing to children throughout recent history.

A child first alternative

I spent nine months over the first Covid-19 lockdown working in a Secure Children's Home (SCH) which held only 28 children. The children frequently stated that it 'wasn't a prison' in their view, which in my experience and observations allowed them to act more like children than *prisoners*. Yet, SCHs only house 10% of the children held in custody, with YOIs holding 73% (MoJ, 2022). This indicates that if we purposely built smaller SCHs – managed by the local authority not the prison service – around the country to house the remaining 450 children, this would align closely with a 'child first' approach to youth justice (Ministry of Justice & Youth Justice Board, 2019). The child first evidence base was adopted as the guiding principle for the Youth Justice Board's strategic plan 2021–2024 (Youth Justice Board [YJB], 2021). The four tenets that underpin the child first approach to working *with* children in the youth justice system are seeing children as children, developing a pro-social identity for positive outcomes, collaboration with children and promoting diversion from the justice system to reduce stigma (Brierley, 2023; see also Case and Browning, 2021). If we placed children who commit serious offences in SCHs until 18 years old, that would allow us to *divert* children away from the prison system and to respect their age and maturity as *children* in the process.

Inevitably, my experience could be argued to be anecdotal, and so this paper will now explore the raw data relating to the ability of the current youth estate to 'improve outcomes for children.' According to the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), in 2023, 64% of children in custody (not including SCHs) reoffended within 12 months of release (MoJ, 2022). This means of every child released from YOIs in recent times, almost seven in ten would reoffend. If we return to 2012, MoJ data indicates that 66.5% of children released from custody reoffended within a year (MoJ, 2015). If we travel as far back as 2000, when I was an incarcerated child, there was a far greater proportion of children in custody, and the reoffending rate within the year was 76.8% (MoJ, 2013) – almost *eight* in ten. This inevitably means more children were negatively affected by the 'pains of imprisonment' (Crewe, 2011, p. 510) and far higher numbers of children were reoffending post-custody, which calls into question any evidence of 'improved outcomes' for children.

Although the Covid-19 pandemic seems to have had a certain negative impact on prisons across the country, as stated by adult prisoners themselves (User Voice, 2022), consideration must be given as to whether there is an expectation that the youth estate is to deliver something that it is simply incapable of achieving if the standard is to 'improve outcomes for children' through a child first approach. Reflection over time demonstrates that YOIs have never achieved improved outcomes, but they have certainly introduced me, and so many other children, to what Sykes described as the pains of imprisonment (see Sykes,



1958). I reiterate, when I arrived at Brinsford YOI, although I had a challenging childhood that included heroin addiction, school exclusion and the care experience resulting from abuse and neglect, I was still ill prepared for these prison pains. I did manage to develop skills to navigate the prison space eventually. However, upon release I was not provided with guidance to understand how to reshape those skills, or supported to know how those skills I developed to navigate the prison context were transferable into the workplace, which did happen as I matured into an adult.

Peer-led approaches

As I am not one to simply highlight problems, I do have a solution to the challenges facing the youth estate in its 'current form.' I am currently working with care leavers in Wetherby YOI, delivering the Clear Approach Programme (see Fitzpatrick & Williams, 2014). This is a participative *peer*-led programme that allows children in custody who have experienced being in care the opportunity to work with someone who has also 'been there' (Fitzpatrick & Williams, 2014, p. 22) and will 'listen, care, and encourage small steps' (Buck, 2021, p. 7). These features are person-centred tenets and core conditions of peer-led initiatives in criminal justice practice (Buck, 2021). There is indeed a growing body of literature highlighting that peer mentors can become 'hooks for change' (Nixon, 2020, p. 54; see also Giordano et al., 2002) and support people involved in offending to desist through the mechanisms of Experiential Peers, Wounded Healers, and Peer Mentors in both adult and young offending populations (Brierley, 2023; Buck 2018; Creaney, 2020; Kirkwood, 2023; Lebel et al., 2015; Lenkens et al., 2021; Maruna, 2001). In contrast, I was originally denied access because of my historical offending in youth, requiring the governor of Wetherby YOI to be creative, override this decision, and allow me to deliver the programme as a peer. This is despite me being an author and researcher, working directly with vulnerable children in the youth justice system for 15 years, and now being employed in a leadership role in a university. Surely, people wanting to 'make good' (Maruna, 2001), 'give back' and be role models to children would be helpful to the youth estate in obtaining *legitimacy*. There is an embodied understanding of navigating through persistent offending in childhood into a crime-free life known as desistance (see Maruna & Farrall, 2004). This embodied knowledge can produce a shared understanding, develop a generative desistance culture, and aid a prison system that is *forever* in crisis - so to reduce the barriers, follow Wetherby YOI's lead.

Conclusion

This paper has explored a personal journey from youth incarceration to youth justice practitioner. The paper draws on HMIP inspection reports to illuminate that the evidence suggests there is not, and never has been, a crisis, other than a 'crisis of visibility.' The argument is that if we want the prison service and young offender institutions to improve outcomes, we, the British public, and



politicians alike need to completely deconstruct the youth estate and rebuild smaller, purpose-built homes for children which allow them to *be* and *feel* like *children*. Given that this may seem like a drastic and expensive change, this paper argues that there are innovative approaches to obtaining *legitimacy* for the youth estate's current form. This would be to allow adult peers the opportunity to lead by example and share their experiences and knowledge of travelling through the desistance process whilst acting as mediators between children and officers. Simply reduce the barriers we as mentors face to returning and offer advice and guidance post-custody. After all, 'we can't be it, if we can't see it.'

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About the author

Andrew Brierley has 15 years' experience in youth justice practice and two years of teaching prison officers on a MSc. Alongside this Andrew is currently a PhD student studying lived experience in criminal justice practice. Prior to his professional career, Andrew lived through the care experience, school exclusion, drug addiction, and prison, which fuels his perspective on social justice.

