



Lord Harris of Haringey Review into Self-Inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18 to 24 year olds.

Submission on behalf of The Michael Sieff Foundation

The Foundation is a registered charity which has been at work since 1987. The Foundation is dedicated to improving policy and practice for the well-being of children and young people. Given the Terms of Reference the Foundation believes that the experience of young offenders in custody will be relevant to the Review.

Since 1st January 2011, 48 young people aged 18 to 24 have died from self-inflicted injuries. The vast majority – 38 – died while being held in adult prisons. Deaths may be recorded as self-inflicted but is this not a distraction from the true, often underlying, causes?

Many stresses currently arise from an overcrowded custodial system, which is currently at record high numbers, in contrast to the rest of Europe. There are high proportions of young people with mental health problems or special needs in custody, for whom better, alternative provision should be made. The advances of recent years, especially in relation to their management at an earlier age, are being thrown into reverse. Educational and other programmes are being disrupted, young people are being held distant from home and the risk of disturbance and self-harm increased.

The culture within which young people are held in custody and who is recruited to work in the sector must give consideration to the welfare of young people in custody and prevention of re-offending in addition to punishment and protection of the public.

There is an accumulation of evidence suggesting that young people's well-being in the UK and their respect for the law is not being advanced. There is a growing realisation that criminalising young people is counter-productive except in the most serious cases. Whereas research evidence shows that criminalising offenders increases rather than reduces the likelihood of further offending, in the United Kingdom we are criminalising more and more young people.

There is a continuing need to recruit and retain adults who want to work with young people and have the right temperament and experience to do so, and are appropriately training and supervised.

The government has succeeded in reducing the numbers in custody in the juvenile secure estate. But they need to go further, particularly as regards the unnecessary criminalisation of young people whose childhood has caused delay in fitting them for adult life. Greater effort should be made to ensure that young people are not detained in institutions which are not suitable to meeting their needs.

In conclusion we support the following:

- Young people with mental health problems and serious special needs must be taken out of the criminal justice system to ensure that their welfare needs are met.
- Management of their specific needs, and by definition assessment of them, must be given special consideration within the secure estate.
- Where custody is essential, staff must be recruited to meet the offender's needs, not merely to keep them detained.
- Custody and criminalisation should be a last resort.

The Michael Sieff Foundation

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