

CHILDREN IN PRISON

In the last decade more and more children have been remanded into custody.

IF PRISONS ARE TO HOLD CHILDREN, THEY MUST ONLY DO SO WHERE A SAFE, DECENT AND POSITIVE ENVIRONMENT CAN BE SECURED, NOT ASPIRED TO.

*Anne Owers,
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons*

THE COMMITTEE IS DEEPLY CONCERNED AT THE HIGH INCREASING NUMBERS OF CHILDREN IN CUSTODY GENERALLY, AT EARLIER AGES FOR LESSER OFFENCES, AND FOR LONGER CUSTODIAL SENTENCES IMPOSED BY RECENT COURT POWERS... [IT] IS THE CONCERN OF THE COMMITTEE THAT DEPRIVATION OF LIBERTY IS NOT BEING USED ONLY AS A MEASURE OF LAST RESORT AND FOR THE SHORTEST APPROPRIATE PERIOD OF TIME, IN VIOLATION OF ARTICLE 37(B) OF THE [UNITED NATIONS CONVENTION ON THE RIGHTS OF THE CHILD].

Concluding observations of the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child: United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, October 2002

Last resort, or first port of call?

The number of children under 18 locked up in England and Wales has more than doubled over the last ten years. In September 2002 there were 3,133.

Despite the requirement of international law that prison should be a last resort for children, the advent of the Detention and Training Order in 1998, children as young as 12 can now be jailed, if they commit an offence which would be punishable by prison if committed by an adult. Following the Crime and Disorder Act of 1998, the Home Secretary has the power to lower the age of detention to 10 years old. The proportion of children in the prison population is higher in England and Wales than in any other European country except Greece and Germany.

How much of a threat?

The majority of children in prison have been convicted of non-violent offences. Of the boys who received prison sentences in 2000 over half were convicted of property crimes such as burglary, theft and criminal damage. Only 28% were convicted of offences involving violence to the person.

Lack of education

75% of those held in young offenders' institutions have not attended school beyond the age of 13. In many cases jails provided young prisoners with their first experience of secondary education, although reports by prison inspectors in 2001 were "consistently critical of the overall management, support and planning of education."

They do learn something, though...

Reconviction rates for children leaving prison are high. Of 14-16 year olds released in 1997, 84% were reconvicted within two years, with 6 out of 10 going back to prison.

Rethinking...

- Is it ever right to lock up children? If so, what kinds of juvenile crime would merit a custodial sentence?
- What facilities and resources should be available for juvenile offenders?