

The National Association for Youth Justice says new report reinforces its call to abolish YOIs and STCs

Case for youth custody reform

YOUTH JUSTICE

By Adam Offord

Youth custody in England and Wales is in crisis and young offender institutions (YOIs) and secure training centres (STCs) should be “abolished”, with more funding pumped into expanding secure children’s homes (SCHs), according to the National Association for Youth Justice (NAYJ).

To support its claims, the association commissioned youth justice expert Tim Bateman of the University of Bedfordshire to review the custodial system, the findings of which are in *The State of Youth Custody* report published this week.

Failures of the system

The report highlights that while the number of young people in custody has fallen sharply over the past eight years – from 3,006 under-18s in 2008 to just under 900 today – those who end up in the secure estate are generally held in settings with a custodial, rather than care, ethos. In May 2016, 73 per cent of under-18s were detained in YOIs compared with around one in 10 in a SCH.

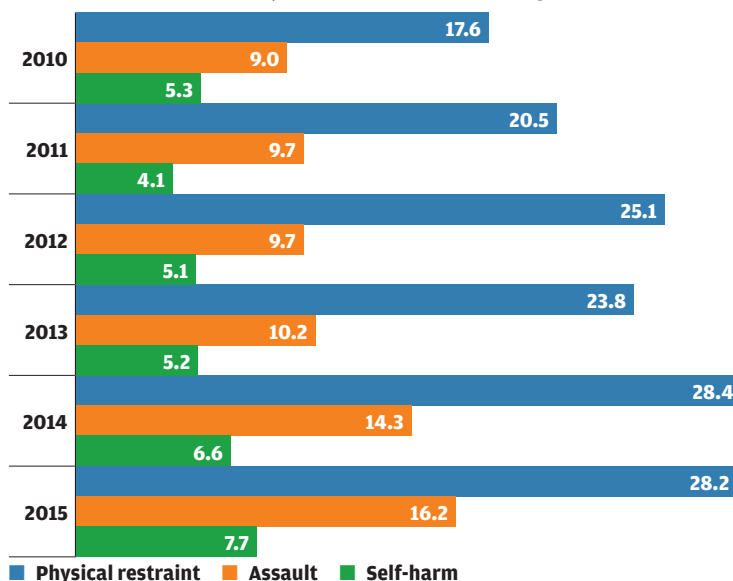
The average length of time spent in the secure estate has grown from 82 days in 2011 to 100 days in 2015, as has the number of young people with a care history, mental health problems and substance misuse.

There is also a disproportionately high number of young people from black and minority ethnic (BAME) backgrounds in the custodial estate. In May 2005, BAME children made up 25 per cent of the imprisoned population, but now account for nearly half.

Child safety has also become an issue, the report states. It cites Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board (YJB) figures that show physical restraint, assaults and self-harm levels have risen in the secure estate in recent years (see

CONDITIONS IN YOUTH CUSTODY SETTINGS

Prevalence of restraint, assault and self-harm per 100 children



Source: *State of Youth Custody*, National Association for Youth Justice and Tim Bateman, 2016

graphics). In 2010, the monthly rate of physical restraints per 100 children stood at 17.6, but by 2015, this had risen to 28.2.

Meanwhile, monthly assault rates per 100 children have risen from nine in 2010 to 16.2 in 2015. Episodes of self-harm per 100 children in custody also rose from 5.3 in 2010 to 7.7 in 2015.

The report highlights how much staff-to-child ratios differ among the three types of secure setting. YOIs typically have one staff member to 10 children and STCs around three staff to eight children.

SCHs, meanwhile, have an average of one staff member to every two children, with training and education levels much higher, the report states. It adds: “Perhaps most importantly, SCHs are characterised by a child care, rather than a custodial, ethos.”

The report compared data taken from Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons into the views of children in YOIs and STCs. A third of children in YOIs said they had felt unsafe in the establishment

compared to a quarter of children in STCs. In addition, 97 per cent of children in an STC said that staff treated them with respect compared to 70 per cent in YOIs.

“There are no equivalent data for SCHs but, to the extent that size and staffing levels explain the differences between YOIs and STCs, it might be anticipated that children’s experiences in SCHs would be better than in either of the larger forms of establishment,” Bateman says.

One in three will also experience isolation during detention, the report states, with children in YOIs likely to spend between eight- and nine-times longer separated from peers than those in a SCH over a seven-month period.

Recommendations for change

The findings provide “a strong case for the abolition of YOIs at the earliest opportunity as being totally unsuited to meeting the needs of vulnerable children”, the NAYJ says. STCs have also shown themselves to be “incapable of

caring for vulnerable children” and should be abolished, it adds.

The NAYJ says SCHs, at their best, are secure accommodation based in a child care ethos that provides a safe environment, which has the potential to minimise the damage caused by custody.

It adds that it is not convinced that “secure schools” as set out in Charlie Taylor’s interim youth justice review are an appropriate alternative form of provision. Instead, it thinks placing children in a secure care establishment that offers high quality education would “better reflect” the complex realities of the children’s lives.

It has proposed the introduction of a “less rigid approach” around incarceration, based on moving children to non-secure accommodation as soon as they no longer pose a serious risk of harm.

Financial implications

The report states that the abolition of YOIs and STCs and an expansion in SCHs would create “short-term resource implications”, but deliver “significant savings” through improved rehabilitation, reintegration and resettlement in the longer term.

“The average per annum cost of a placement in an SCH is roughly £200,000, so that the entire existing custodial population could be accommodated in secure children’s homes for £174m,” it states.

“During 2015/16, the YJB’s expenditure on the provision of custodial placements was £136.9m. The replacement of YOIs and STCs by SCHs could accordingly be achieved through a modest budgetary expansion of £37.1m.

“This figure is still 57 per cent below the £316m allocated for the provision of custodial accommodation in 2009/10.”

The NAYJ also says ending the sentence of life imprisonment for crimes committed by under-18s would lead to further falls in the number of children in custody.