

History shows abuse of children in custody will remain an 'inherent risk' – report

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A room in a young offenders institute. Credit: [Catholic Church England](#)

New research conducted for the current independent inquiry suggests that – despite recent policy improvements – cultures of child abuse are liable to emerge while youth custody exists, and keeping children in secure institutions should be limited as far as possible.

A new report on the history of safeguarding children detained for criminal offences in the UK has concluded that it is impossible to

remove the potential for [abuse](#) in secure institutions, and that the use of custody for children should only be a "last resort."

A team of criminologists and historians from the universities of Cambridge and Edinburgh were asked by HM Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS) to build a "collective memory" of the abuse cases and preventative policies that emerged in the youth wing of the UK's secure estate between 1960 and 2016.

The research was commissioned to help prepare HMPPS to give evidence to the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. It covers physical and sexual abuse in secure children's homes and training centres, young offender institutions such as Deerbolt and Feltham, and their predecessors: detention centres and borstals.

Drawing on often limited archival records – as well as inspection reports and previous findings – the research reveals how past safeguards broke down, failing to recognise children in custody as vulnerable.

Researchers found abuse was especially likely at times of overcrowding and budgetary constraint, and occurred despite contemporary beliefs that protective policies were working.

The historical overview goes beyond individual misconduct to show how whole institutions become "detached from their purpose," with undertrained staff collectively drifting into "morally compromised" cultures where abusive acts appear acceptable even as procedure is followed.

The researchers say this "acculturation" at times extended to inspectorates and monitors overfamiliar with failing systems. They argue that it is vital to ensure effective complaints processes and protect whistle-blowers.

The report has been produced by Cambridge criminologists and Dr. Lucy Delap and Professor Louise Jackson from the History and Policy network, and is published online today alongside a policy paper summarising the findings.

"History tells us that it is impossible to 'manage out' the risk of abuse through improved policies alone," said report co-author Dr. Caroline Lanskey, from Cambridge's Institute of Criminology (IoC).

"The steep power imbalance between staff and children means there is a need to focus on staff culture, rather than only on detailed policy, in order to establish greater trust between staff and young people in a secure institution," she said.

Until the 1990s safeguards against abuse were weak, and ineffective in many institutions, say researchers. Children were often left to "fend for themselves" in detention centres such as Medomsley, where reports of [sexual abuse](#) during the 1970s and 1980s have since come to light.

The research reveals major rifts in the mid-1970s between the external Board of Visitors – Medomsley's main monitoring body – and the centre's management over disciplinary approaches. Inspections of the time recorded that neither staff nor children "seem to know what the purpose of the centre really is..."

Inspectors were concerned with basic functions such as kitchen cleanliness. That the kitchen manager worked unsupervised, and hand-picked his team of children and [young people](#), was not perceived as risky. This Medomsley manager was subsequently convicted of sexual offences.

"Inspectors and Boards of Visitors checked procedure, but they lacked the concepts and language to recognise that certain situations were

potentially abusive. These blind spots persisted until at least the 1990s," said Ben Jarman, a researcher at Cambridge's IoC, who carried out the archival research.

The turn of the millennium saw a "new orthodoxy" in protective policies, combined with a spike in custodial sentences for children that wouldn't decline again until 2010.

Part of this policy shift included the questioning of long-standing practices such as strip-searching and forms of restraint, and whether they amounted to abuse.

"Strip-searching before the 1990s seems to have been so routine and unremarkable that it's hardly mentioned in the documentary record," said Jarman. "As late as 1995, inspectors at Deerbolt reported without comment that staff believed more routine strip searches were required."

However, by 2002 inspectors were expressing serious concerns about untargeted strip-searching. A 2005 inspection of Feltham described strip-searches as "degrading," and an independent inquiry the following year argued that, in any other circumstances, such practices would "trigger a child protection investigation."

The use of pain-inducing restraint has also become the subject of fierce debate and some [policy](#) change, following the deaths of two children in secure training centres in 2004.

Strip-searching and restraint are still used but much more carefully regulated. New monitoring systems attempt to take account of the 'voice' of children, who the report suggests have been recast as 'users' of custodial 'services.'

Yet improved safeguards can inspire false confidence and mask the

"corruption of care," say researchers. The exposure by the BBC of violence and bullying by staff in Medway Secure Training Centre in 2016 came shortly after an inspection declaring safety there to be "good."

"Investigations at Medway concluded that child protection failed despite the apparent compliance with safeguarding policies," said Jarman.

"Inadequately trained and under pressure to achieve contractual targets, some of the staff did not appear to understand what they were doing was wrong."

"We wouldn't argue for fewer safeguards, but without a focus on staff culture, even the best policies can be circumvented when an abusive climate develops," he added.

"The ever-present potential for abuse means that custody should be used for [children](#) only as a last resort, where there is no alternative," the report concludes.

Provided by University of Cambridge

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