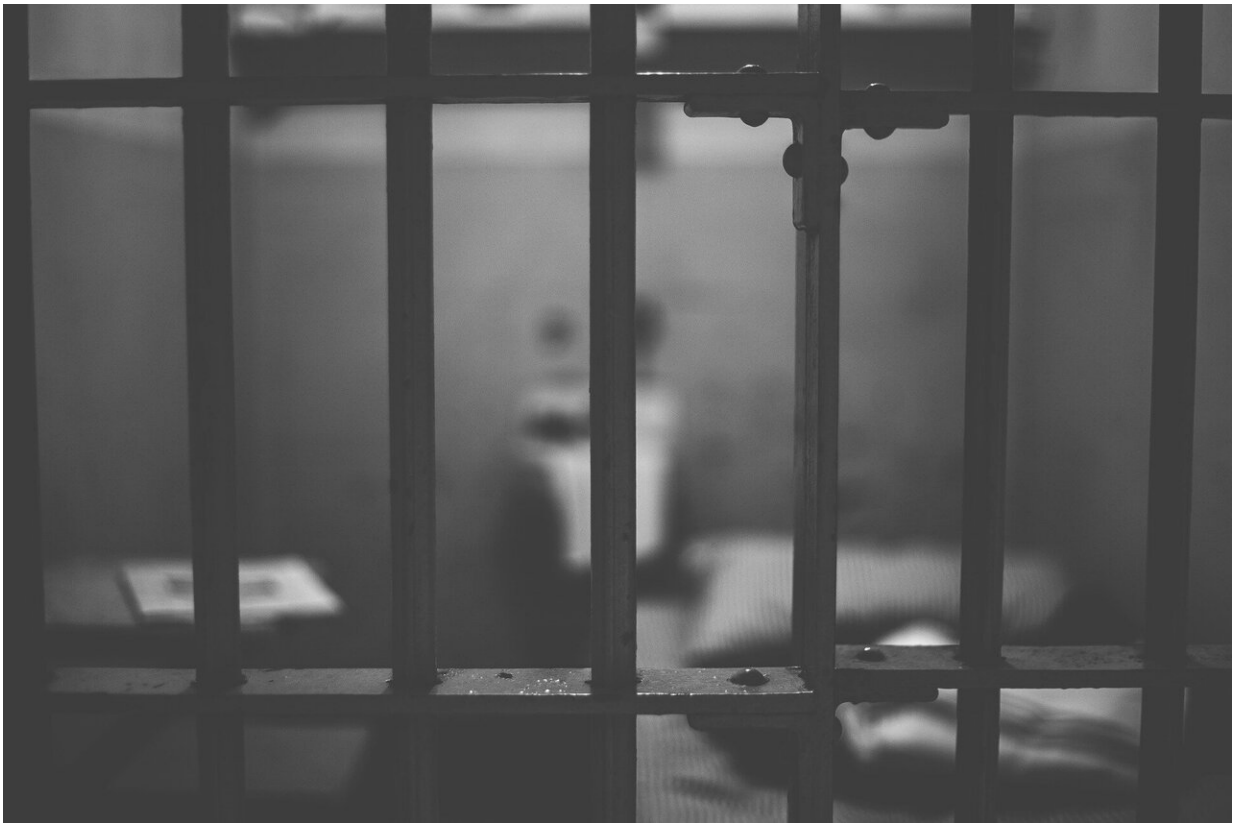


Incarcerated children adopt 'survival strategies' while living in prison, study shows

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A Keele University criminologist is calling for change in the behavioral management of children in Young Offenders' Institutions (YOI), as part of a study into the experiences of children going through the youth

justice system.

New research published in *Safer Communities* by Dr. Anne-Marie Day from Keele's School of Social, Political and Global Studies has found that current techniques used to manage the behavior of young people, such as the use of excessive force and long periods of [time](#) in isolation, led to [children](#) adopting survival strategies throughout their time in incarceration.

Dr. Day interviewed 48 children who were either currently in custody or had been released in the previous 12 months and spoke to them about their time in prison, and how it had challenged their identity and sense of self.

The main method of behavior management within a YOI is the "Incentives and Earned Privileges" scheme whereby those that behave and comply with the scheme are rewarded with extra privileges such as increased visits from friends and family and time out of their cell, and those that do not comply with the scheme are punished with reduced visits and long periods of isolation in their cell.

The children who were interviewed described adopting one of two strategies to help them cope while living in a YOI; either keeping their head down or fighting. Many of the participants explaining how being locked up for prolonged periods of time had a [negative impact](#) on their mental health, with a number of interviewees reporting that they had experienced suicidal thoughts and self-harmed for the first time.

Other children also described their experiences of being restrained and the difficulty of maintaining contact with the outside world as other factors that put them in conflict with the prison regime, often leading to further punishments.

Dr. Day is calling for a review of the "Incentives and Earned Privileges" scheme, stating that it should be replaced with a system that is more child friendly, and based upon a child's individual, complex support needs. The findings of this study have highlighted that the continued use of the scheme as a way to manage children's behavior in custody is both harmful and erodes their sense of self.

Many children also described how important contact is with friends, family and professionals in surviving time in custody, with Dr. Day recommending that face-to-face and telephone contacts with family, friends, [social workers](#), youth justice workers and other professionals should be reviewed with the provision of private rooms for children to meet face-to-face with professionals, as well as the ability to make free phone calls from their cell.

Dr. Day said: "The evidence from the study reveals that time spent in Young Offenders' Institutions does not help children in any way. Rather, a child's incarceration is a deeply traumatizing experience that they must survive. The behavior management regime is a key feature of this experience and in need of urgent reform."

More information: Anne-Marie Day, The experiences of children in custody: a story of survival, *Safer Communities* (2021). [DOI: 10.1108/SC-11-2020-0040](#)

Provided by Keele University

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