



A TERRIBLE COST

Some Thoughts on Youth Suicides in Prison

For a short while last year the media managed to do something that criminal justice practitioners had been trying and failing to do for years. They focused the attention of the public and central government officials on the continuing tragedy of suicide, and particularly youth suicide, in prison. This followed the deaths of four young people within a period of just nine months at a single Young Offenders Institution, Feltham.

Suicide, particularly when a young person is involved, is a shocking occurrence. Suicides in prison are even more horrifying and are a damning indictment of any penal system. Such suicides must surely be the ultimate sign of the failure of a prison - failure to provide adequate care, supervision or control.

Frequency

If suicides in British prisons were rare, their occurrence might be easier to come to terms with. However over the past eleven years, 69 young men and women aged 20 and under have killed themselves in prison. In the eleven months to the beginning of December 1992 there had already been seven suicides by young people in prison. Figures issued by both the Home Office and the Samaritans indicate that young men in prison are more than six times more likely to commit suicide than young men in the community. Such statistics show clearly that our penal system has a specific problem in relation to suicides and the deaths at Feltham highlighted that problem within one institution.

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One of the problems encountered when considering suicides in prison is the tendency to pathologise and individualise each death. This tendency has

allowed systemic factors involved in prison suicides to be marginalised. It is difficult to state unequivocally the reason leading to any specific suicide and in all cases there are causal factors which stretch beyond the bounds of the prison, but it is possible to identify contributory factors. While suicides in prison continue to be addressed on individualistic bases, the systemic contributory factors are allowed to continue unchallenged.

If the continuing tragedy of youth suicide in prison is to be alleviated, there are some obvious issues that must be addressed immediately.

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Local Variations

Despite legislation over the past decade aimed at promoting community based alternatives for young people, especially juveniles, there are still large numbers of juveniles and young adults who end up sentenced to or remanded in custody. They are strikingly similar in type, age, background features and offending behaviour, to young men who in some probation and social services areas are being worked with successfully and constructively, through community based sentences or who have been placed in local authority secure accommodation. The continuing variation in sentencing practice at courts and the inconsistent quality and availability of community options in different probation or social services areas exacerbate the situation. There cannot be enough emphasis placed on the inequity of a system which allows a young person who is handled by a juvenile justice team in one area to be dealt with constructively within their community, while another young person in a neighbouring area is remanded or sentenced to custody several hundred miles away because of low quality probation or social services provision or commitment to non custodial options.

YOI Regimes

Once placed at a YOI several problems arise. Most young men who end up in YOIs are made confused and vulnerable by their removal from home and community, particularly if it is their first experience of incarceration. Observation at Feltham YOI reception showed that many young people sent to Feltham also have mental or emotional instability problems. This would indicate the need for high levels and quality of care.

However the poverty of regime in most YOIs ensures that such care cannot be provided. Some of the problems associated with regimes include limited availability and poor quality training programmes for inmates. Education provision has been cut in some institutions and there is concern about the effect of the tendering process for prison education. High levels of use of control and restraint procedures and segregation give further cause for concern. A specific problem raised at inquests following deaths at Feltham YOI was the number of hours many inmates spent locked up in their cells. Prison officers and governors spoke of young men spending between 19 and 22 hours a day on a regular basis, locked in their cells. Few adults have the inner resources to cope with spending even 19 hours in one day locked up on their own. It is naive, cruel and irresponsible to expect 15 year olds and older teenagers to be able to cope with being locked up for such periods for weeks and months at a time. It is difficult to understand how the inhumanity of

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locking up 15 year old children and young men in tiny cells for 22 hours a day has been accepted both by prison staff and management and by the Home Office and prison department staff. Such behaviour in other countries, or even in other child care establishments in Britain would be decried as inhumane and unacceptable.



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Relationships

A fundamental problem is the poor quality of relationships between prison officers and young offenders in their care in most institutions. When the Home Office removed the majority of probation officers from YOIs, it was on the basis that prison officers would take on duties as personal officers, but at Feltham YOI, for example, there is no formal personal officer system in operation in most of the prison. A comparative study of the quality of life in YOIs and local authority homes for boys held on Section 53 orders found that only 18% of YOI boys felt they could trust most of the staff with a private matter and only 37% described the relationship between staff and inmates as 'friendly'. Poor relationships would make the provision of adequate care and implementation of suicide prevention policy difficult if not impossible.

Prison officers working in YOIs receive the same basic training as officers working in other parts of the prison system. The little training they receive in relation to interpersonal skills focuses on controlling aggressive behaviour. While this is an important area it in no way prepares officers to work with or care for young people and especially vulnerable young men. In fact the training received and its emphasis on security

and discipline appears to constrain the ability and desire of officers to work with young offenders in a manner more consistent with the treatment of young offenders in the community or in local authority secure units. The Home Office allows that YOIs are different to adult prisons. It needs to take this recognition much further and make working within YOIs a specialism within the prison service, therefore providing different training for officers and promoting a different, more constructive approach to the care of young offenders. Specific units within individual YOIs have shown that the ethos can be improved and better quality care provided for imprisoned young people, but examples of such good practice are limited and have tended to rely on the goodwill of individual prison officers and their ability to manipulate the penal system.

Guidelines

The Home Office has produced a number of constructive suicide prevention circulars and guidelines for prisons, but there appears to be a major problem in implementing recommended practice. At inquest after inquest into different suicides in prison, prison officers, prison doctors and other prison staff profess ignorance of the suicide prevention guidelines. However even where prison



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staff are aware of the guidelines, the poverty of regime in most YOIs make their implementation impossible.

There is clearly a high level of concern in YOIs and the Home Office about the high levels of youth suicide in prison. However this concern must be turned into constructive action which deals with some of the fundamental flaws in our penal system. Changes must involve all criminal justice practitioners and policy makers - from social workers and probation officers, through magistrates and judges to prison officers, governors and central government officials. Unless the fundamental flaws in the penal system are addressed, the high levels of prison self injury statistics published by the Home Office last year indicate that the suicides that have occurred recently will only be the tip of a horrifying iceberg.

Theo Sowa is a freelance researcher with wide experience in the juvenile justice system.

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