

Few subjects engage public attention and anger more than the criminal behaviour of young people, mainly male, which is alleged to cost the country over £1 billion per year, and the victims between £2 and £3 billion per year. So Sir David Ramsbotham introduces HM Inspectorate of Prisons thematic review of young prisoners¹. The report, launched at a press conference on 19th November 1997, formed the inspiration for the third of this year's ISTD day conferences addressing the incarceration of the young.

Conference report

Simon Marshall reviews the ISTD day conference 'Young People in Prison: What's to be Done?' 20/11/97, King's College London.

Challenging the system

Choosing not simply to paraphrase the thematic, **Sir David Ramsbotham**, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, instead took the opportunity to talk about the inspiration for the review and his concerns more generally about young people and imprisonment. He spoke about the need to see young people as both a product of, and a resource for society, berating what he saw as a culture of avoidance and exclusion. He pointed out that those excluded from school at 14, unless others intervene, may well find themselves in Feltham by 16.

The statistics presented by Sir David were a stark reminder that the problems of the criminal justice system cannot be solved by the system alone: one-half of young prisoners (ie those under 22) have been in care; two-thirds had no qualifications; many left school (for whatever reason) at the age of eight or nine; two-thirds were unemployed; 91% had misused drugs and 17% admitted to having been abused though three-quarters had received no counselling for either. Perhaps most sobering, given that 20% lived independent of any family, was that one-quarter of young prisoners were fathers, most of whom had no relationship with their children. The thematic review dedicates a section specifically to the needs of female prisoners and again found that 49% had been abused, 37% had attempted suicide. In the last year alone twenty had succeeded.

Insisting that all children under 18 should immediately be removed from prison and placed into a separate youth justice framework, Sir David concluded by saying that the answer was to equip

the Prison Service with the tools to do the job.

The Chief Inspector was followed by **Joyce Quin MP**, Minister of State for Prisons and Probation. Welcoming the report, she reaffirmed the Government's commitment to tackling the problems of young offenders and spelt out some of the ways in which she hoped they would be addressed in the Crime and Disorder Bill. As Minister with responsibility for both prisons and probation, she underlined the need for a holistic approach and agreed with Sir David's view that the soft option would be to do nothing. She drew attention to a Prison Service review looking at best practice in the juvenile estate and stressed that the announcement of a Director of Regimes should ensure that provision for young prisoners is coordinated.

Celebrating good practice

Seminar sessions before and after lunch provided an interesting counterpoint to the big picture presented by the opening speakers.

Pam Bedford, Assistant Director at the privately run HMP Doncaster, gave a fascinating insight into their anti-bullying strategy, publicised by BBC2's Prison Weekly.

Meanwhile, **Fran Russell** presented the findings of the Howard League study on the imprisonment of teenage girls. During 1995-1996 the numbers of females under 18 in prison trebled. Of the 61 girls interviewed 7% were aged 15. Echoing the Inspectorate's concerns, the report argued that prison is no place for juveniles.

Carrying on the theme of minority groups within the juvenile system, **Michael Poselay**, Assistant Governor at HMP Featherstone spoke on the difficulties facing ethnic minorities in prison.

The forgotten victims?

For many, myself included, the highlight of the conference was a session by **Jane Wrafter** and **Bob Clements**, from Feltham, accompanied by David, a 16 year old serving young offender and his mother and father. David was convicted of attempted robbery under the influence of alcohol at age 14. His barrister had told the family he could expect to be sentenced to up to a year. Instead, David was sentenced to 4 years of which he has served one. Speaking openly and in turn, the family gave a frank and deeply moving testimony to the impact of imprisonment. David spoke of his deep regret at the pain and distress he had brought his

family, whilst his parents spoke of feelings similar to bereavement, of his sister being bullied at school, of the problems caused by his mother's dyslexia and the nervous breakdown she had suffered resulting in the father having to give up work. They singled out individual officers at Feltham for praise for their support. Shortly before committing the offence David bought a BMX bike. When he leaves prison it will be too small - he will be 18 and legally able to drive. Whilst David suggested the experience had brought the family closer together, the two officers pointed out that of the 150 families of inmates at Feltham they are probably the exception.

Accepting difference and building bridges

According to **David Wapington**, Governor of Moorland, the Prison Service's difficulty in its handling of young persons is in failing to recognise the common traits of adolescence. The former Governor of Lancaster Farms, his pro-active ethos of 'preventing the next victim' was praised by the Inspectorate and he was instrumental in developing training for staff and inmates in handling adolescents.

Incarceration of the young rose 30% in the three years to 1996. What this timely ISTD conference has once more demonstrated is the dangers of tunnel vision and the need to recognise basic human nature and individualism in a system which by its very nature dehumanises. If we are to tackle this costly burden, both financial and social, we must look to a holistic, inter-agency approach, focusing on the issues not the managerial solutions. We must also aim to stop the demoralisation of society's damaged goods, in which the media has a large part to play. As the thematic review underscores, young prisoners will return to the community, and therefore it really does matter how they are treated in prison. The choice is ours. Either we can give them education, to make good the ravages of what they have denied themselves by truancy or been denied by exclusion... or we can continue on our present course, with all the damage that it is doing not only to the young people themselves but to the society to which they will return.

Simon Marshall is Information Officer at ISTD.

HM Prison Inspectorate of Prisons (1997) *Young prisoners: a thematic view* by **HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales**, Home Office: London



Pam Bedford

Julie Grogan



Fran Russell

Julie Grogan