

# Secure Training Centres

Ann Hagell describes the history and current position of Secure Training Centres for young offenders aged 12-17.

Not all that long ago I co-authored a report on persistent young offenders (Hagell and Newburn, 1994). That was in response to a request from the Home Office for some preparatory work looking at the potential recipients of a new criminal disposal - the Secure Training Order (STO). In order to get an STO, offenders had to be aged 12-14 years, to have breached a community disposal and to have committed three imprisonable offences. Half of the STO was to be served in custody, half in the community. Policy makers subsequently (not consequently) decided to move forward with five Secure Training Centres (STCs) to provide the custodial half of the disposal. The first was based in Medway in Kent and opened in 1998. Two more centres at Rainsbrooke and Hassockfield were opened shortly afterwards. All are run by private companies, the first two by the same company (a subsidiary of Group 4). The fourth and fifth do not yet exist.

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Medway originally had capacity to take 40 'trainees' at any one time. It was intended that the full set of five STCs would cater for 200 persistent young offenders in total.

## From STCs to DTOs

Later this year, the Policy Research Bureau will be concluding a major evaluation of the first two years of the first of these STCs. The six years that have passed between the two pieces of research have been fascinating in terms of youth justice policy and practice developments. There can have been few periods in youth justice when the changes have come so thick and fast, and, unlikely though it would have seemed at the start in 1994, we are now approaching the end of the life of the STCs as originally planned, even before all five are opened. Since April this year their position has become rather unclear, as the STO has now been replaced itself by another new disposal, the Detention and Training Order (DTO). The DTO covers the full age range from 12-17 years (and younger, at the discretion of the Home Secretary), encompassing the current age range covered by STCs.

Despite being in at the beginning, it might be argued that we are already out of date! There is a serious message in here about not waiting for the results of expensive evaluations before sweeping on with reforms, but on the other hand we can continue to learn from results that come out of years and years of research even if the institutions themselves change.

A custodial institution for children by any name is still a custodial institution for children. In reality there is little in the history of the STCs that we have not seen already on many occasions in the last 200 years of trying to deal with the most persistent young offenders. In this brief lull between Criminal Justice Acts, while there is a short break in the rapid fire of new disposals, it might be useful to stand back and take a longer view of the position of the STCs in the tumultuous history of youth custody. How did they come about and do these types of interventions generally work?

## Locking up children - where do the STCs fit in?

The first penal institution reserved exclusively for male juvenile offenders was Parkhurst Prison on the Isle of Wight, opened in the early 19th century. This coincided with the development of the modern construction of childhood as a distinct social and legal category. Over the 200 years since, institutions for dealing with persistent young offenders have included Reformatories (mid 19th century), Remand Homes and Borstals (both early 20th century), Industrial Schools, Approved Schools, and Detention Centres (around the 1930s), local authority secure units and community homes with education (both 1960s), Youth Treatment Centres (1970s), Youth Custody Centres (1980s), Young Offender Institutions (late 1980s), Secure Training Centres (1990s) and, potentially, Detention and Training Centres (2000). In many cases, implementation of a new type of centre marked the merging or closing of an older type. Several factors fuelled the proposals for the STCs in the 1990s, including the latest phase of a recurring moral panic about rising levels of youth crime, a series of urban disturbances, and the occurrence of some high profile grave crimes committed by very young offenders.

Currently we have local authority secure units, YOIs and Secure Training Centres. The rest



can conclude that STCs and their like have no role to play in youth justice. However, we also have to continually be reminded that the UK is signatory to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and that custody has to be an absolutely last resort for the tiniest minority. What history does show us without a doubt is that the types of young people going to the STCs (or their replacements) are going to be high-

have come and gone, often for good reason. Many sprang from admirable reforming intentions, intended to improve the lot of at-risk young people, but the problems of confining these difficult and demanding children demonstrate familiar and recurring themes. The press has reported a series of problems at Medway, also covered by the only public document to date about the centre (Social Services Inspectorate, 1999), and there is little new to these stories. History would suggest that we should expect tensions surrounding successful education of these children, occasional outbursts of control problems, passionate advocates for and against the service being provided, interest in treatment (but problems in implementing anything consistent or effective), initial optimism giving way fairly swiftly to pessimism as the early graduates make their mark.

### **Are custodial interventions for children effective?**

On the basis of what we know already, do we expect the STCs to work? Well not really, but it depends how well they are run and where we set the criteria for 'success'. We need to wait for the

Medway evaluation itself, but research evidence from previous interventions shows very poor outcomes after release from custody, the majority reoffending within two years. For young offenders under 18 the outcomes are even worse. Home Office figures have shown a reconviction rate of 89 per cent for 14-16 year olds leaving YOIs (Home Office, 1995). But we do know that some factors make for more effective custodial interventions: these include successful educational rehabilitation, firm but not harsh discipline, cognitive-behavioural reoffending programmes, a pro-social ethos, chances to change, and strong links with families (Rutter, Giller and Hagell, 1998). The more the STCs and their like can develop these features, the better the chance that they will influence the trajectories of their residents. We have yet to find a 'cure' for persistent offending (apart from age, which works in some cases). All that we can expect is small incremental steps.

If guidelines from research are followed, there is thus potential to do something useful. As a researcher rather than a campaigner, I cannot throw the baby out with the bath water. I need solid empirical data before I

and multiple-risk. Everything has gone wrong for them, and they are among the most vulnerable people we will meet. We can change the name and culture of the intervention, but persistent young offenders are perennial. Whatever we do, they need very careful and - inevitably - very expensive interventions if we are actually going to reduce crime at the end of the day. ■

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