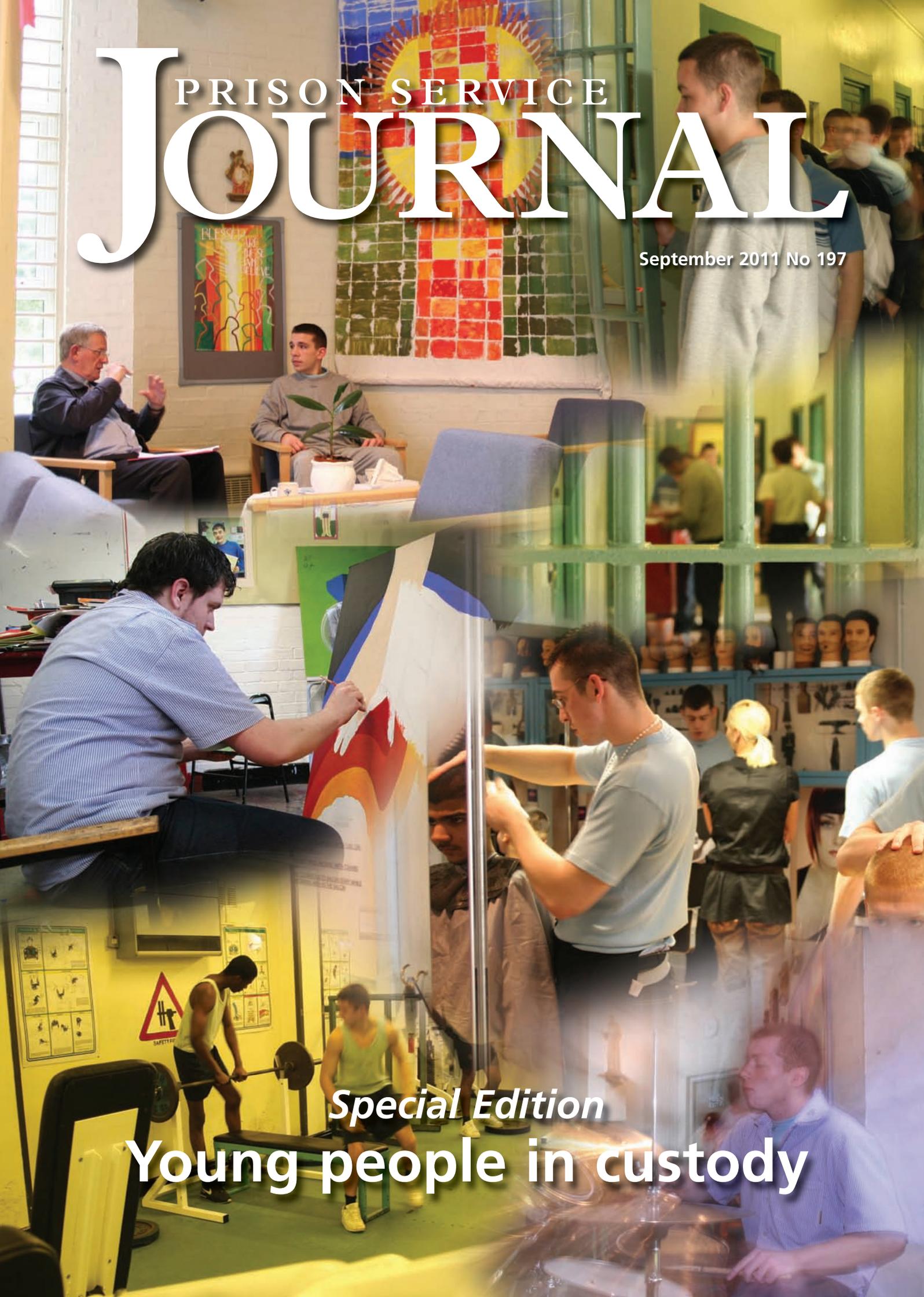


# PRISON SERVICE JOURNAL

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*Special Edition*  
**Young people in custody**

# Editorial Comment

## Young People in Custody

**Karen Harrison** and **Helen Johnston** are both at the University of Hull and are guest editors of this edition.

This *Special Issue* brings together a range of articles by academics, practitioners and charitable organisations concerned with young people in custody. The issue is organised into three sections: the development of penal policy towards children and young people over time and contemporary use of imprisonment; young people's experiences of custodial settings; and, the operation of particular regimes or aspects of regimes for young people. Many of the articles draw on research which allows for young people and the people who work with them to express their experiences in their own words.

The first article in this issue examines the historical development of penal policy towards children and young people. **Heather Shore** reminds us of the importance of understanding the history of custody and imprisonment and reflects on the decisions of the past which have influenced the direction of penal policy towards young people over time. She traces the development of separate institutions for children and young people from the early charitable institutions of the eighteenth century, to the Industrial and Reformatory schools of the Victorian period and the Borstals and Approved Schools of the twentieth century. It is not just the development of these institutions that is of interest but ideas about juvenile criminality and malleability (or not) that have influenced the structure and the shape of the contemporary penal system.

Having set the scene in terms of the historical development of the use of custody towards young people, the following two articles in this section examine the use of custody in contemporary society. **Tim Bateman** argues that whilst the recent decline in the population of the secure estate for children and young people should be welcomed this should not obscure some underlying concerns about child imprisonment. The wide variation in the use of incarceration differs significantly according to the geographical area of the court and more importantly, by individual youth offending teams (YOT). At YOT level differentials are substantially greater and this cannot be explained by local patterns of youth crime but amounts to 'injustice by geography'.

**John Pitts** provides us with a fascinating comparative article on the use of custody and residential disposals of children and young people in Finland and in England and Wales. This article examines the use of institutionalisation in these two countries and in doing so challenges some widely held beliefs about the use of custody in one Scandinavian country. It is frequently argued that the UK should look to Scandinavia when developing penal policy, often based on evidence that Scandinavian countries have much lower rates of imprisonment. Whilst this is still a persuasive argument, Pitts reveals a more complex picture in which children and young people are placed in secure settings but settings that are welfare based rather than labelled as custody or imprisonment as they would be in England and Wales. More than this, it seems that cultural differences in societal views in Finland mean that the damaging and stigmatising effects of custody on children and young people are more limited in terms of how this is viewed and there is less emphasis on children and young people as part of a rigid family structure, something which often strongly underpins social policy in England and Wales. As such the Finns have a low rate of imprisonment but a high degree of involvement in the lives of young people.

The second section of this issue examines the experiences of custody for young people. We know much about the social exclusion and imported vulnerabilities of many of the children and young people in our penal system; many have suffered physical or sexual abuse, they often come from the most socially excluded and deprived sections of the community, many are vulnerable and present the system with challenging and difficult behaviour. These three articles draw out different aspects of the experience of confinement. **Helen Jones** argues that we need to understand the 'whole' experience of custody and this starts *before* a young person has reached a Young Offender Institution (YOI). Academic research has revealed the importance of the first night in prison in terms of the prevention of suicide, the 'pains of imprisonment' and the effects of custody on offenders and aspects of this have been taken on board by the Prison Service, particularly in terms of suicide prevention.<sup>1</sup> Jones's research shows that the

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1. Sykes, G. (1958) *The Society of Captives*, Princeton: Princeton University Press; Liebling, A. & S. Maruna (2005) (eds.) *The Effects of Imprisonment*, Cullompton: Willan; Liebling, A. (2007) 'Prison suicide and its prevention' in Y. Jewkes (ed.) *Handbook on Prisons*, Cullompton: Willan.

frustration, distress, anxiety and difficulties coping in custody can be felt much earlier in the criminal justice process; in pre-prison locations such as in police and court vans, police custody suites and court cells, and increased awareness of such experiences can give us a greater understanding of the psychological pains of custody and how these can be imported into the prison or YOI.

**Joel Harvey** takes up one of the most important aspects of the experience of custody, that of mental health. Drawing on personal experience and interviews with clinical psychologists, Harvey argues that in order to provide the best therapy for young people in custody, therapists must understand not only the therapy being offered but also the context of the prison and the effects of imprisonment on young people. Through psychological formulation, Harvey advocates an effective means by which the systemic factors, the prison context and the effects of that context can impact on therapy.

The final article in this section draws on a wider piece of ethnographic research on ethnicity and identity carried out in a YOI. Here, **Rod Earle** takes as a starting point the recent comments on multiculturalism by the Prime Minister, David Cameron and shapes an article which gives a revealing insight into how young men in prison understand questions of ethnicity and identity. This evidence presents a challenge to the Prime Minister's views by demonstrating the complex textures of racism, anti-racism and multicultural conviviality in the social relations of young men in custody.

The final section of this issue focuses on particular regimes or aspects of regimes for young people in custody. The first piece, by **Karen Harrison** and **Terry Wilson** examines the development of the Keppel Unit at HMYOI Wetherby and sets out what this Unit is trying to achieve through a safe and supportive environment for the young people referred there. Although the Unit only opened in October 2008 and is in its early stages there are already some positive results in the achievements of the unit in addressing the complex needs of some very damaged young people and provides a considerable argument for the expansion of such regimes across the country.

The following two pieces focus on education, **Elaine Cobb** outlines current issues and concerns surrounding education for young people in custody. The links between truancy, exclusion, disengagement from education and offending are well known and for

those young people who end up in custody, many have negative views of formal education and have been disengaged for long periods. Custody can and should offer the opportunity for re-engagement with education, not only do education departments have to be equipped to deal with young people working at a diverse range of qualifications, accommodate custody lengths averaging three-four months and the complex learning needs of young people they must aim to spark motivation and equip young people with study and social skills for the future. The article finishes with two inspiring case studies of what can be achieved.

The second article on education demonstrates the way in which music and art can be used to counter previous learning experiences and engage young people in positive experiences. **Kirstin Anderson, Fergus McNeill, Katie Overy** and **Lyn Tett** evaluate three *Inspiring Change* arts interventions, two music projects and one visual arts project, at HMYOI Polmont, Scotland. Their research suggests that music and arts projects such as these can change young offenders' negative attitudes towards education, can increase self confidence and self esteem through learning new skills, working in groups and towards a goal. The article also evidences the ways in which through maturation, social bonds and identity these projects have the potential to contribute towards desistance from crime.

The final substantive article comes from recent research by the Howard League for Penal Reform, here **Jenny Chambers** Policy Development Officer for the campaigning charitable organisation argues that basic needs for young people are not being met in YOIs. Their research shows that young people frequently expressed concern about the quality and quantity of food provided and that behaviour and bullying in institutions are linked to food; either through lack of food affecting concentration and behaviour, or bullying for additional food, particularly fruit. In addition, opportunities to enhance young people's social skills and personal development are lost, due to being locked up to eat, or the lack of opportunity to learn about or prepare their own food, skills which are essential for future release and independent living.

This issues interview sees **John Drew, Chief Executive of the Youth Justice Board** (YJB) in the spotlight. Karen Harrison asks John to reflect on the current situation with the YJB, the use of custody for children and young people and the Board's future challenges.