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**Young people in custody**

# Enough on their plate

## Food in young offender institutions for 15-17 year old boys

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*The government are always telling us to eat healthy, get our 5 a day, but the quality of food in here is really, really bad.*

Young person, 15.

*Before I came into the justice system I didn't really care about it. Now I'm in it some bits are ok, but most of it is disgraceful and people have no idea.*

Young person, 16.

### The Howard League for Penal Reform

**The Howard League for Penal Reform was founded in 1866 and campaigns for less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison. As an independent charity, the Howard League has a longstanding reputation for campaigning through its parliamentary work, research, policy work, events and media engagement. In 2002, the Howard League launched the only dedicated legal service for young people in custody in England and Wales and, in 2007, this service was extended with the launch of a young adult legal team, who represent young people up to the age of 21 in prisons.**

In July 2009 the Howard League for Penal Reform launched U R Boss. Funded by the Big Lottery for five years, U R Boss is a ground-breaking youth justice project that provides a national programme of participation opportunities and support for young people in custody and those recently released in the community.

### Introduction

Despite the recent fall in the total number of children in custody, England and Wales has the highest rate of child imprisonment in Western Europe and, at 10, the lowest age of criminal responsibility; recent figures show that on average over 2,400 children are held at any one time and over 8,000 still pass through the secure estate each year<sup>1</sup>.

The majority of children in custody are 15-17 year old boys who are incarcerated in failing young offender institutions (YOIs): 74 per cent of these children are reconvicted within a year of their release<sup>2</sup>.

It is for this reason that the Howard League's participation project, U R Boss, worked with 15-17 year old boys in YOIs to produce *Life Inside 2010*<sup>3</sup>. U R Boss recognises that children in trouble with the law are some of the most vulnerable in society. Their voices are seldom heard. Our participation team worked over a course of six months with boys in YOIs to chronicle the day to day conditions and experiences of life inside for the majority of children in custody and includes their recommendations for change. The report covers areas such as arrival into custody, education, treatment and conditions and contact with the outside world. We worked with children who had been left in isolation in their cells, been injured through restraint, incarcerated hundreds of miles from their families and communities and let down by professionals throughout their lives. Yet, despite the catalogue of abuse, failings, and exclusion that the children we worked with had suffered, the area that was spoken most passionately by nearly all of those we worked with was the food they receive in YOIs.

A healthy, balanced diet, of sufficient quantity, is vital for children's development and provides them with a foundation for success. In recent years, food in schools in England and Wales has been radically transformed to improve the life chances for children in the community. Despite coming from some of the most socially and economically deprived backgrounds in our society, children in prison have been left behind, let down and left hungry.

The concerns that the children we worked with broadly fell into three overlapping areas: quality and quantity; behaviour and bullying; and deprivation and development. These are discussed further below.

The inability of prisons to meet such a basic need of children epitomises the problem of delivering appropriate and proper services to children in YOIs. It is clear that children in custody are extremely vulnerable, yet they are locked away in environments that do not meet their basic needs, exacerbate their underlying problems and, as evidenced by the high reoffending rates, fail the families and communities they return to on their release.

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1. Ministry of Justice (2011) *Statistics bulletin: Youth Justice Statistics 2009/10. England and Wales*, Ministry of Justice, London.  
2. Ministry of Justice (2011) *Statistics bulletin: reoffending by juveniles: results from the 2008 cohort. England and Wales*, Ministry of Justice, London.  
3. The Howard League for Penal Reform (2010) *Life Inside 2010*, The Howard League for Penal Reform, London.

## Quality and quantity

Many of the children that we have worked with complained of repetitive and unhealthy menus, food being served cold and still being hungry after meals due to the small portion sizes<sup>4</sup>.

Through a Freedom of Information request, the Howard League has obtained the menus of every YOI in England and Wales, the content of which substantiates children's claims regarding the quality of food and the variety, particularly for children that have dietary requirements. In one YOI the only vegetarian lunch options, every day, are a cheese and coleslaw or vegan sausage baguette. One offers grated cheese as the main meal option. Another serves a kebab pizza as a hot meal option<sup>5</sup>.

One of the overriding causes of the poor quality and quantity of food provided for children in YOIs is the systemic failing to provide a sufficient amount of money to spend on food. Although there are differences between institutions, as little as £2.50 is spent for all food per child per day (Hansard, 1 February 2010).

Another systemic issue that often leads food to be cold is that many YOIs are on 'split-sites', meaning that the food is prepared on the adult site of the prison and has to be transported over to the children's wings, which can take some time. Often, as adults are more able to engage in processes to express their opinions and discontent, food for adult prisoners is of better quality and variety. This is reflected in the menus that the Howard League obtained through their Freedom of Information request. However, by the time the food is transported it can be cold, congealed and have lost much of its nutritional value. We believe it is nonsensical that children, who are still developing, do not receive meals that are even on a par to those received by adult prisoners.

The value that is placed on children's nutrition and development is reflected by the fact that there are no separate requirements for food provided in YOIs compared to food in adult prisons. The specifications for catering standards (PSI 44/2010) are concerned with the provision of safe, wholesome and nutritious food, in that order of priority. This reflects that security, rather than meeting children's needs, is the priority in YOIs. The nutrient content of menus is not monitored and how the specification is met is for the governor at each

establishment to decide, in a time of budget and regime cuts. Although there are examples of good practice across the estate, the introduction of central catering contracts has constrained the possibilities for good practice, by limiting the ability to purchase local products and to take advantage of special or reduced offers.

### Findings from HMIP inspection reports into YOIs for 15-17 year old boys

*'[Young people] complained that the food sometimes ran out. There was no hot meal at lunchtime and the breakfast packs were inadequate for adolescent boys'<sup>6</sup>.*

*'Goods were delivered to the wings on Friday and given to young people on Saturday. There was no facility to order goods at other times, although there was a reception pack for new arrivals. This lack of opportunity to purchase canteen goods for up to 11 days had implications for bullying. Young people we spoke to described bullying for canteen as a problem'<sup>7</sup>.*

*'Some young people were required to eat in their cells as part of a punishment. Cells were not suitable for dining, since this meant that young people ate in a small space alongside a toilet without a lid'<sup>8</sup>.*

*'There were some days on which vegetarians would not have had a menu choice for the evening meal, as fish was supplied as the 'vegetarian' option'<sup>9</sup>.*

## Behaviour and bullying

Children in custody come in the main from the most disadvantaged families and communities, whose lives are frequently characterised by social and economic deprivation, neglect and abuse. Issues that have arisen as a result of their upbringings and development result in a complicated challenge to meet the needs of these children in order that they are able to engage in any education and other opportunities provided.

- ❑ 88% of boys have been excluded from school<sup>10</sup>.
- ❑ 15% have a statement of special educational needs<sup>11</sup>.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

6. HMIP (2009) *Report on an unannounced full follow-up inspection of HMYOI Cookham Wood*, HMIP, London.

7. HMIP (2009) *Report on an announced inspection of HMYOI Hindley*, HMIP, London.

8. HMIP (2008) *Report on an announced inspection of HMYOI Wetherby*, HMIP, London.

9. Ibid.

10. Tye, D (2009) *HM Inspectorate of Prisons, Youth Justice Board: Children and Young People in Custody 2008-2009: An analysis of the experiences of 15-18 year olds in prison*, HMIP, London.

11. Youth Justice Board (2003) *Asset: the evaluation of validity and reliability of the Youth Justice Board's assessment for young offenders*, Youth Justice Board, London.

- ❑ 31% have a recognised mental health disorder<sup>12</sup> compared to 10% of the general population<sup>13</sup>.
- ❑ 19% suffer from depression, 11% anxiety, 11% post-traumatic stress disorder and 5% psychotic symptoms<sup>14</sup>.

Added to these complex issues, children told us that they were frequently hungry, due to the quantity of food they receive, as outlined above, and that it affected their concentration and behaviour. This is further compounded by the fundamental problem that children are missing breakfast. Operational necessities, such as shift times, low staffing levels and the need to leave early to attend court appearances, mean that many YOIs issue a week's worth of breakfast packs in one go, or children receive them the evening before. Children are so hungry that they eat the limited contents of these packs straight away, leaving them without any food in the morning, which affects their ability to engage in education, concentrate in court, and is ultimately detrimental to their nutritional development. *Life Inside 2010* reports that in acknowledgement of this issue, the governor of one YOI had introduced a muffin break halfway through the morning to improve behaviour and engagement in education, out of savings found in her own prison budget. This example,

however, was unlikely to continue to be possible due to budget reductions. Not only does this affect the short term ability of children to engage effectively in the YOI regime, it also has severe long term consequences. Studies show that children who do not have breakfast are more likely to be inactive, unfit and obese, and are more likely to develop chronic diseases in adulthood<sup>15</sup>.

In an intervention study recently carried out by the School Food Trust<sup>16</sup>, secondary school pupils were 18 per cent more likely to be on-task and 14 per cent less likely to be off-task in the classroom when school lunches and dining rooms were improved. This applied particularly to

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time spent working on their own. No work has been undertaken to see if changes to catering provision and modes of eating in YOIs have similar benefits.

Children in YOIs are able to purchase additional items from the YOI 'shop', which includes bags of fruit. Shockingly, we were told that they are in such high demand that children were bullied into buying them and handing them over to other young people. We were also told how fruit has become currency in one YOI because it is in such short supply.

### Deprivation and development

Although there are some opportunities for children to dine together, much of the time children are locked in isolation in their cells to eat alone. This deprives them of the opportunity to develop basic social skills that many have missed out on prior to entering custody. Many children we worked with who had been in secure children's homes, compared this to sitting together mixing with staff at the dining tables: as one boy put it, 'you learn to do what normal people do on the out'.

The daily routines of the children we worked with varied both between YOI and within individual YOIs. However, two key elements of all YOI regimes undermine the possibility of children being able to eat all of their meals in a communal environment with staff.

Firstly, children spend little time unlocked from their cells. Despite there being a target in place that prisons should allow a minimum of 10 hours out of cell a day, very few children said they were allowed out of their cells for this long. YOIs were recently branded a 'disgrace' for not meeting their time out of cell targets, dropping as low as an average of 7 hours and 42 minutes a day in one YOI. This compares to an average of 13 hours and 18 minutes in secure children's homes<sup>17</sup>.

12. Youth Justice Board (2005) *Mental health needs and effectiveness of provision for young offenders in custody and in the community*, Youth Justice Board, London.

13. ONS (2005) *Mental health of children and young people in Great Britain*, Department of Health, London.

14. Chitsabesan et al. (2006) 'Mental health needs of young offenders in custody and in the community', *British Journal of Psychiatry*, vol 188, 534-540.

15. Campbell D (2010) '32 per cent of pupils skip breakfast before school, study find: report stokes concern that children who miss morning meal are much more likely to develop chronic diseases in adulthood', *The Guardian*, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2010/aug/16/third-pupils-skip-breakfast>.

16. Storey HC, Pearce J, Ashfield-Watt PAL, Wood L, Baines E, Nelson M. A randomised controlled trial of the effect of school food and dining room modifications on classroom behaviour in secondary school children. *European Journal of Clinical Nutrition*, advance online publication 27 October 2010; doi: 10.1038/ejcn.2010.227.

17. Puffett, N. (2010) 'Youth jails branded a 'disgrace' for leaving offenders in cells', *Children and Young People Now*, available at <http://cypnow.co.uk/Archive/978010/Youth-jails-branded-disgrace-leaving-offenders-cells/>.

Secondly, with staff ratios as low as three officers to a wing of 60 children, there are simply not enough staff to facilitate all of the children dining out for every meal. This compares to a ratio of four staff to eight children in a secure children's home where children dine out with staff as a matter of course. As Rose argues, 'this is not just an issue of numbers, but also reflects a quite different understanding about the role of staff in terms of their expected relationship to the young people'<sup>18</sup>. This systemic problem undermines the possibility, not just of opportunities to be out of their cells, but for children to benefit from positive relations and staff and role-modelling. Research substantiates that lower staff ratios affect children's behaviour, as both the low numbers and underlying ethos they represent lead to an over-emphasis on regime security and greater use of punitive sanctions<sup>19</sup>.

This epitomises the wider issue that YOIs are unable to meet children's needs. Research is consistent in showing that the ways in which daily routines of residential living are provided and delivered have the greatest impact on young people and also influence their responses to the more formal aspects of prison, such as education and offending behaviour work<sup>20</sup>. However, rather than providing the foundations for success, one of which would be to instil basic social and interaction skills the majority of children learn in the community, YOIs continue to reinforce the cycle of deprivation these children have been brought up in.

There are also few facilities or opportunities for children to learn about or prepare their own food. Not only would such opportunities provide them with a programme of nutritional education that would help them when released, formal qualifications would aid them to enter into sustainable employment and live a crime free life.

This is one example of the issues surrounding limited educational opportunities that YOIs provide (explored in depth in *Life Inside 2010*). This is of particular concern given that Ofsted concluded; 'a significant barrier to changing the behaviour and expectations of children and young people of all ages who offend or who are likely to offend was the lack of access to education, training and employment and, in particular, the lack of appropriate provision'<sup>21</sup>. Again, this shows that YOIs are unable to provide meaningful rehabilitative opportunities for children who are in conflict with the law.

## Conclusion

The Howard League for Penal Reform believes that all children should be treated equally. What a child has done is separate to who they are, and if a child commits a criminal offence, that offence should not define them. Only by providing a foundation for success through addressing the needs of the whole child can enduring solutions be found, reoffending cut and our communities made safer. Providing an appropriate diet plays its part in this.

The issue of food in children's prisons represents a plethora of failings, which demonstrate that they are unable to meet children's needs and in many ways exacerbate the issues that have arisen from backgrounds of chaos, neglect and abuse, which are the underlying causes of child offending.

All of the issues raised in this article came directly from children incarcerated in YOIs. Only by listening to their voices and acting on what they raise can we improve their life chances and reduce reoffending, for the ultimate benefit of all our communities.

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18. Rose J, 'Types of Secure Establishment', in Blyth M, Newman R, and Wright C, (2009) *Children and Young People in Custody: Managing the Risk*, Policy Press, Bristol, page 27.

19. Howell, J (2003) *Preventing and reducing juvenile delinquency: a comprehensive framework*, London: Sage Publications.

20. Rose J, 'Types of Secure Establishment', in Blyth M, Newman R, and Wright C, (2009) *Children and Young People in Custody: Managing the Risk*, Policy Press, Bristol.

21. Ofsted (2010) *Transition through detention and custody: arrangements for learning and skills for young people in custodial or secure settings*, Ofsted, Manchester, page 4.