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Believe in
children



Barnardo's

Children and the criminal justice system: Martin Narey, Chief Executive, Barnardo's

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One of the best decisions I ever made in my 23-year civil service career was to appoint Rod as chair of the Youth Justice Board...

Children in trouble & criminal justice

Many years ago, for the first few years after graduating, I worked in the health service, and I was very happy working in the health service. My wife and I had our first child, now a big lump of a 27-year old, and we were in that period of life which some of you will recognise, when we didn't go out very much. So I saw, in the summer of 1981, the first fly-on-the-wall documentary about a British prison called Strangeways, made by the inspirational, hugely talented filmmaker Rex Bloomstein. It painted an astonishingly candid portrait of Strangeways prison in all its depravity. I found it absolutely fascinating but frightening. A few weeks after it finished one Sunday evening my wife passed me a copy of the Sunday Times and there was an advert for people to train to be assistant governors in the prison service. Having consumed Strangeways, I had no intention of doing anything of the sort, but I was lured by the fact that the advertisement said that if you were interested in applying you could phone a number in the Home Office and you could go and have a look round a prison. So I started my 23-year relationship with the Home Office with deceit and pretended I was interested in joining the prison service. And on Christmas Eve in 1981, on a very snowy day I paid my first visit to Lincoln prison, which like Strangeways is a local prison. It was filthy, it was overcrowded, it was squalid, most of all it stank. This was in the days of slopping out, and the whole place stank of human waste. There wasn't a hint of rehabilitation, it was quite obvious to me that no prisoner in there was treated with even a modicum of decency, but I left Lincoln prison on that afternoon with the absolute certainty that I didn't want to do anything else. I applied to be an assistant governor, had to go back to Lincoln to do a bit of officer training, and then was posted, in the dying days of Borstal training, posted to a place called Deerbolt, a Borstal in the remote part of teaster, just near a town called Bernard castle, And when I reflect on those years in the eighties, working with young offenders and children, because Borstal took anybody from 15-21, it seems like a different era. It was entirely routine for me to take a boy home for a Sunday lunch, and my wife would cook a Sunday dinner, somewhat inappropriately, with the way we frown on smoking today, we'd always send him back to the Borstal with ten 'players number 6'. Boys on a weekend, and young men, went out into town with their parents. At any one time in a Borstal, which was full of young men and children who had committed quite serious crimes, children with shorter sentences in those days weren't in detention centres, it was routine that we would open the doors on a Saturday and Sunday afternoon and perhaps a hundred children and young people, all offenders, would all go into town, and nobody minded at all. In fact there was, I promise you this is true, there was a spate of shoplifting at Woolworths in Barnard castle, and the boys from Barnard castle school, a rather grand grammar school, were banned from going into Woolworths on Saturday afternoon, but the manager made it very plain that it was alright for the Borstal boys to go in.

That sort of tolerance has long gone. Of course there were problems, boys used to abscond, it was very frequent that somebody didn't come back, and we used to tell the police, and the police used to shrug their shoulders and say fine, and they'd wait a few days and they'd go to the boys home and there he would be. Because we're not talking about master criminals, we're talking about young people without

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any resources, and they do silly things like runaway, and after a couple of days at most they go home. It was a different world. I stayed with prisons for 23 years and I don't regret a day of it and sometimes invited since I've been at Barnardo's, to somehow deny my past and repent. I don't regret a day of it. I haven't abandoned a view, that custody can work, and I know that some people in the voluntary sector are shocked at that, some people in Barnardo's may be surprised at that, but I do believe and recognise that unfortunately some children do need to be locked up, many children need to be locked up. And I believe that, however damaged their upbringing, no matter how explicable their behaviour, many children need to be locked up for their safety and for ours. Sometimes, just sometimes, it can be the best thing for a child, just sometimes it can take children and young people out of a time of extreme crisis, it can temporarily remove some chaos from their lives, it can get them off drugs, it can reintroduce or, sometimes, introduce them to education. It can make them employable, it can help them find accommodation, and it can get their lives back on track. Just occasionally, custody can do that. In fact, I remember not very long before I resigned from my job in the Home Office to come to Barnardo's I remember meeting a young boy at Castington Young Offender Institute, a young man called Adam. Adam was just 15 when he committed a post office robbery of such startlingly incompetence, it would make you laugh if it hadn't led to him getting a very long sentence indeed. He should have really gone to a children's home, or a secure training centre, but he was just 15 and a half, and there wasn't room and he had to go to Castington. Fortunately he went to a small unit where at least a modicum of decent care for a vulnerable child could be given. He could neither read nor write when he arrived, but he responded surprisingly well in literacy and numeracy classes, and he became a natural at IT, and 2 years after coming into Castington, armed with NVQ certificates in literacy and numeracy and very high level of certification in IT, he wrote a little book on his computer for his nephew, about a caterpillar. Two years after coming into Castington, he won a Puffin book of the year award for the book he'd written. He went home shortly after I met him, to parents who would barely have recognised the boy who was taken away from them at 15 and a half.

But I'm afraid those beacons of hope are just too infrequent. For the most part, custody for children is a staggeringly expensive waste of time. The capacity of young offender prisons in particular, to make any progress for the child in custody, is routinely diminished, if not completely extinguished, by the numbers that we lock up. When in 1998 I became Director General of prisons, I was very fortunate. This was a time of great optimism, we'd just had a Labour government elected, and one of the first things I did, when I worked for Jack Straw, was to write a speech for him which he gave as a Prison Reform Trust annual lecture in 1998. The speech was called 'making prisons work'. It was an intended riposte to Michael Howard's 'Prison works' and it involved a commitment to run prisons, and particularly prisons for children, in a different way. Jack was true to his word, he gave me a fortune which we poured into an expansion of education, particularly basic skills education, into cognitive therapy, and into drug treatment. We handed a very large proportion of that very significantly inflated prison budget, over to a newly created body, called the Youth justice Board. They used the money to create genuinely intensive community alternatives to custody. In Particular the intensive supervision and surveillance order, and we waited for the number of children who we locked up to fall. Fleetingly, they did. The numbers who were locked up fell by about 10% in 2002-2003, but the number soon recovered. But in that all-too-brief period, there was just a sign to me that one of the consequences of locking up fewer children, was that we might just start to make custody work. At one establishment which I was running, Huntercombe, then run by an inspirational young governor, which started to make a difference. On units which used to hold 60 boys, we only put 40 boys, and even though 40 boys was still far too many, suddenly we saw a difference as they got more access to education, more access to drug treatment, and spent more time with one or two of the excellent prison officers that worked at Huntercombe. But that lasted about six months, and as the number of children we sent to custody increased, so did maximum capacities. I remember there were many dark days in being Director General, there were good days as well, but one of my darkest was when the governor of Fulmer phoned me to tell me that he was ashamed at a direction that had been sent on my behalf, that because of overcrowding on the estate, he should send children as young as 16, who lived in London, to beds in a Young Offender Institute in Northumberland. I was ashamed as well, but I had to tell him to do it.

The reality, for the vast majority of children and young people we incarcerate, particularly in young offender institutes, is that they live typically in a unit of as many as 60, and with only enough staff to prevent them hurting one another. There is just far too little treatment, far too little rehabilitation for each child ever to make a difference. If we took people who were ill, and put them into hospitals but gave

them no treatment, but somehow expected a few weeks in the building would somehow make the difference. But that's what we do, in the main, with the offenders we lock up, and with many adults, young men themselves, it's all we do, they get little or not rehabilitation whatsoever, and we expect their lives to improve. My time working with offenders in the prison service and then the probation service, and most particularly in the last 3 years at Barnardo's has convinced me of the overwhelming importance of education. If there is one thing, one thing which above all else might make a difference to someone's future behaviour and their life chances, it is addressing education deficiencies, particularly for the droves of young people we lock up, who've been excluded from school.

The sad reality is that despite Youth Justice Board insistence, for some years now, that in Young Offenders Institute children get 26 hours of education each week. A recent answer to a written PQ, which I'm surprised didn't cause a storm of protest, listed the hours in each YOI. The reality is that no young offender provides anything like 26 hours of education. At Castington in Northumberland, boys get 2 hours a day. At Feltham and Stoke Heath, an hour and a half each day. This is education, for some of the most educationally-disadvantaged children in the UK, and it is an enormous lost opportunity. For the most part, child custody, usually served in short and futile periods, has no effect on offending, and the respite it offers to estates and to towns and villages is purely temporary. When the tabloids shriek for badly behaved, dishonest, or violent children to be locked up, they don't seem to realise that frequently these children have already been locked up, sometimes more than once, and it simply hasn't worked. Children have not suddenly become difficult. Shakespeare talks in 'A Winter's Tale' and says 'I wish there were no age between 15 and 20, or that youth would sleep through the rest, for there is nothing between but thieving, fighting, getting whores with child, and upsetting the ancient tree'. We're not remotely the first generation to despair of children, but we have responded to this routine despair in a peculiarly negative manner.

So what can we do differently? Quite simply, we have to have a fundamental aim of keeping more children out of custody. And when we do that, we might just make custody work for those who have to be there. To keep them out of custody, and in any reaction to child offending, we have to do something other than simply to the child. Taking a child away from a few weeks and locking them up, can generally do nothing. We have to do something with the child, with the families, frequently their extended families, and with all the work we do in Barnardo's in Family Group Conferencing, it is so often the grandparents who are the key figures, and we have to do something with their schools. But I am afraid I am depressed about the possibility of reducing child custody while locking children up continues to be a political virility symbol. We have to have a media and a political debate which rises above the lame caricaturing of any argument which involves any proposal which suggests any sort of tolerance towards children in trouble. Last week when we in Barnardo's pointed out, not unreasonably one would suppose, that referring not just to children in trouble, but to all children, as 'parasites' or as 'feral' or as 'vermin', when we said that was unreasonable, we prompted a full-page diatribe from Richard Littlejohn in the Daily Mail. Apparently I'm: "A leading light in the guardianista establishment, which has created and nourished the social breakdown we find ourselves having to contend with today". And all that, for simply suggesting that we shouldn't children as 'feral'.

Being attacked by a buffoon like Richard Littlejohn makes me rather proud. My kids were very impressed! Frankly, I've met too many people like him in a 23-year career with offenders. People who thought custody should be cruel, people who thought there should be no concept of rehabilitation, until their 16-year old goes into trouble, at which point they become enthusiastic advocates of tolerance and proportionality. More disappointingly than any attack from the Daily Mail, a similarly modest proposal which Barnardo's made at each of the three party conferences about locking up fewer very young children, prompted a cheap shot from Jack Straw to the Sun about Barnardo's ignoring victims.

We have to have a better debate. The reality is that about one in three children will commit a criminal offence at some time, and that proportion has not changed for about 25 years. The increasing incarceration of very young children maps not some rise in child offending, but simply a marked deterioration in our tolerance. Let me give you an example. Until the mid-nineties, it was accepted that very young children should not be locked up, simply not be locked up. As recently as 1995, the only children aged between 10-14 who we locked up in England or Wales, were the 100 children sentenced that year for so-called 'grave crimes'. Now last year, the number of children sentenced for grave crimes fell by a third from the 1995 figure. Incontrovertible evidence showing a genuine reduction in serious

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offending by children. But last year, in addition to the 70 or so we jailed for grave crimes, 600 other children aged 12, 13, and 14, were locked up for non-grave crimes.

600 children, 12, 13, and 14, locked up last year, some of whom have committed summary-only offences, those offences described in statute as the least serious. The incarceration of 600 children, which would have been illegal when Margaret Thatcher was prime minister. We need fewer children locked up, not to be nice to troubled children, although I make no apology for saying that we should be. But because, for their benefit and our benefit as society we need to reduce their reoffending. And this isn't an academic opinion, Barnardo's works with many thousands of children like this, that we're not a soft touch, our alternatives aren't easy. The schools we run, which demonstrably turn round lives, demand and get decent behaviour from pupils who've been excluded from school after school previously. They flourish in part because pupils understand boundaries, and in my experience are comforted by them. Go to our website, and listen to an interview with the mum of a young girl at Meadows School in Tunbridge wells which we run. Let me give you a flavour of it, this is the mum talking about her daughter charlotte:

"She was what you would call a wayward young lady, she was obnoxious, she was rude, she was violent and she was aggressive. She was arrested, she was into drugs, she was drinking. But at Meadows she was able to start again. Everything that happened before was put into a draw, she seemed to turn a corner and move on. She's working now, and has been offered an apprenticeship in catering. I think she'll have a good life."

Barnardo's have launched our first ever TV advertising this week, some of you may have seen it, it's a brief film called 'Breaking the cycle', ending the cycle of offending abuse, taking of drugs, and physical abuse. And it has shocked some people, but the mini-drama of abuse which that film captures is not remotely untypical. In showing it, we're not seeking simply sympathy for the criminal child, we're not justifying poor or criminal behaviour, we're just trying to explain it a little bit. It was very significant that last week the whole of the United Kingdom seemed to be shocked if not devastated about 'Baby P'. The tragic probability, is that had Baby P survived, he would probably have been unruly by the time he was 13 or 14, at which he wouldn't have been Baby P any longer, he'd have become 'feral' a 'parasite' a 'yob', helping to infest our streets. All terms used on newspaper websites very recently, about children. And what would our response have been to an unruly Baby P at 13 or 14? We'd have locked him up. Until we link the emotional and physical deprivation of children to their offending, we are determined not to prevent it. Until we recognise that offending might, in part, be linked to levels of child poverty here in the UK, levels which should shame a country of our affluence, we have to be resigned to that offending continuing. Until we determine, to send disadvantaged children to the best schools, and not to the one which you and I make sure our kids didn't have to attend, until we resolve not to exclude children from school, we shall continue to keep my old colleagues in the prison service very busy. Until we stop the persistent and casual incarceration of children who are neither violent nor dangerous, we shall simply embed their disadvantage, depress their life chances alienate them further from work, and do precisely nothing to stop their poor behaviour. These children deserve better, and their victims deserve better too.