

Enough on their plate

A briefing on food in young offender institutions for 15-17 year old boys

'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

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 around 2,300 children are held at any one time and over 8,000 still pass through the secure estate each year.

The majority of children in custody are 15-17 year old boys who are incarcerated in failing young offender institutions (YOIs): 75% of these children reoffend within a year of their release.

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*. This report covers their day-to-day experiences and recommendations for change, including areas such as arrival into custody, education, treatment and conditions, and contact with the outside world. The area that was spoken most passionately by nearly all the children we worked with was the food they receive.

Food in young offender institutions

A healthy, balanced diet, of sufficient quantity, is vital for children's development. In recent years, food in schools in England and Wales has been radically transformed to improve the life chances for children in the community. 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:

1. 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. 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. In one YOI they serve baguette with a corned beef pasty filling. In another, 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.

A fundamental problem is that children are missing breakfast. 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 can eat the limited contents of these packs straight away, leaving them without any food in the morning.

2. 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 per cent of boys have been excluded from school (Tye, 2009)
- 15 per cent have a statement of special educational needs (YJB, 2003)
- 31 per cent have a recognised mental health disorder (YJB, 2005) compared to 10 per cent of the general population (ONS, 2005)
- 19 per cent suffer from depression, 11 per cent anxiety, 11 per cent post-traumatic stress disorder and 5 per cent psychotic symptoms (Chitsabesan et al, 2006)

Added to these complex issues, children told us that they were frequently hungry, and some commented that it affected concentration and behaviour. In acknowledgement of the issue, in one YOI the governor 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.

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

In an intervention study recently carried out by the School Food Trust (Storey et al, 2010), 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 time spent working on their own. Work should be undertaken to see if changes to catering provision and modes of eating in YOIs have similar benefits in relation to behaviour in children in prison.

3. 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.

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.

We believe 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 an appropriate diet and addressing the needs of the whole child can enduring solutions be found, reoffending cut and our communities made safer.

References

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