

Emma Hardy MP: Government's segregation of young people in prisons is lowering prospects and making them vulnerable to reoffending

Written by: Emma Hardy MP House of Commons Posted On: 2nd April 2019

We are witnessing a serious mental health epidemic in our prisons. The Government must ask themselves why they are subjecting young people to segregation for extended periods, says Emma Hardy MP.



Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) must balance punishing a child for committing a crime with the need for rehabilitation and assisting the child to become a productive member of society who will not offend again on release, says Emma Hardy MP. Credit: PA Images

To send a child to prison is something that nobody wants to see done. It shows a failure of many parts of our societal infrastructure and everyone would agree that it should definitely be a last resort. Young Offenders Institutions (YOIs) must balance punishing a child for committing a crime with the need for rehabilitation and assisting the child to become a productive member of society who will not offend again on release.

The use of segregation in YOIs, in a similar manner to those used in adult prisons, does not create the right balance between these goals. Let us be clear what we mean by segregation here. We do not mean “time outs” as an immediate response to violent or disruptive behaviour, or situations where a child must be physically isolated for their own protection or the protection of others. We mean when a child is segregated in a cell, on their own, sometimes for up to 23 and a half hours a day.

The Children’s Commissioner recently found excessive use of segregation in the youth estate, with children locked up and isolated in greater numbers, despite the overall numbers of those in custody falling. She also found that the average length of segregation has doubled, with around 70% of episodes of segregation believed to have lasted more than a week and one episode of segregation lasting more than three months.

If segregation was working as a form of punishment then levels and lengths of segregation should be going down, not up. The Royal College of Psychiatrists recently argued that punishment for punishment’s sake brings out the worst in some young people and does nothing to help them become a positive member of society. There is also clear evidence that it is counter-productive. Rather than improving behaviour, solitary confinement fails to address the underlying causes, and creates problems with reintegration.

It also does nothing to address the underlying issues of why a child may have been put into the YOI in the first place. According to the Prison Reform Trust, over half of segregated prisoners said that they had problems with three or more of the following: anger, anxiety, insomnia, depression, difficulty in concentration, and self-harm. This is much higher than the 1 in 3 average for the prison population as a whole. So not only is the MoJ segregating people excessively, they are doing it to those children who are already the most damaged. As a result, it does nothing to help rehabilitate them.

In addition to this, restricting their ability to take part in classes, studies, workshops or training that helps them increase their chances of achieving a better life on the outside after their release compared to when they went in. This is because the way segregation is used restricts their ability to be purposeful whilst segregated.

In theory, segregation should not prohibit access to education, but in many cases, children are in their cells all day and only allowed out for 30 minutes, and they do not always have access to ‘education packs’ while in their cells. This also has a negative mental impact, as if the children had something to keep them occupied in a constructive way it would help stave off the damaging effects of isolation on their mental health. When the child comes out, therefore, they are further behind their peers, have even lower prospects and become vulnerable to reoffend.

When we are witnessing a serious mental health epidemic in our prisons the Government must ask themselves why they are subjecting young people to segregation for extended periods, particularly as they know the impact that it has and how ineffective it is in helping rehabilitation.