
**Safety in youth custody
Westminster Hall debate
2.30pm-4pm, Wednesday 20 January 2016**

The Howard League for Penal Reform is the oldest penal reform charity in the world. We campaign, lobby, publish research and through our legal team, represent children and young adults in custody. We work towards less crime, safer communities and fewer people in prison.

Introduction

On Monday 11 January 2016 a BBC Panorama investigation aired that showed alleged abuse at G4S-run Medway Secure Training Centre. Among the allegations, which are subject to police investigation, are that staff: slapped a boy several times in the head; pressed heavily on the necks of children; used restraint techniques unnecessarily, including squeezing a boy's windpipe so he had problems breathing; used foul language to frighten and intimidate, and boasted of mistreating children, including using a fork to stab one in the leg and making another cry uncontrollably; tried to conceal their behaviour by ensuring they were beneath CCTV cameras or in areas not covered by them and that staff colluded to falsify records.

Since the programme was broadcast, five G4S staff members have been dismissed and three more suspended. Police have arrested and bailed five men. Four of the men were arrested on suspicion of child neglect. A fifth person was held on suspicion of assault. They have all been bailed until April.

The Medway scandal should be viewed in the history of the controversy of the Secure Training Centres (STCs) and the recent rapid decline in safety levels across in both prisons and private STCs detaining children.

The children's secure estate

Despite the welcome drop in the number of children in penal custody in England and Wales, there are still 1,000 children imprisoned at any one time. Children are held in one of three types of institution:

- Young Offender Institutions (YOIs) – part of the prison estate, the majority of children are still detained in YOIs, where there has been deterioration in conditions and increases in violence, the use of force and solitary confinement. One relatively new common theme is the increasing use of 'restricted regimes'. These can be imposed on individual children or across whole prisons, often a response to staffing shortages. These regimes can mean that children are locked in their cells for up to 23 hours a day, akin to solitary confinement. The latest figures show there are 669 children in YOIs.
- Secure Training Centres (STCs) - STCs are privately centres run for profit. There were four STCs, but Hassockfield, run by Serco, was closed at the end of 2014. The remaining three (Medway, Rainsbrook and Oakhill) are currently run by G4S. New contracts for Medway and Rainsbrook will commence in April/May – G4S is keeping Medway but Rainsbrook is being taken over by MTCNovo, a company that ran a prison in the US criticised by a federal

judge as a “horror as should be unrealised anywhere in the civilised world”. The latest figures show there are 210 children in STCs.

- Secure children’s homes (SCHs) – run by local authorities, these are small, intensively resourced and staffed by trained professionals. The Howard League contends that for the very few children who require a period in a secure environment, they should be cared for in these locally run units. Because they are more expensive, however, SCH places have been cut by the Youth Justice Board. The latest figures show there are 112 children in secure children’s homes.

Secure Training Centres – a history of controversy

Below is a brief, by no means exhaustive, timeline, of the secure training centres.

- April 1998 – Medway STC opens, accommodating up to 40 boys. It was expanded in 2002.
- [June 1998](#) – A riot takes place in Medway
- 19 April 2004 – 15 year-old Gareth Myatt is restrained to death at Rainsbrook in a ‘seated double embrace’, which resulted in him becoming breathless before choking to death on his own vomit.
- [9 August 2004](#) – 14 year-old Adam Rickwood is found hanging in his cell at Hassockfield after having a nose distraction restraint inflicted on him for ‘good order and discipline’.
- [June 2007](#) – The inquest jury into Gareth Myatt’s death made sweeping criticisms of the Youth Justice Board (YJB) for the failure to test the safety of the restraint technique used on him that that had been a contributing factor to his death.
- [July 2007](#) – The government announces that it has acted after two inspection reports confirmed concerns about control at Oakhill. The YJB admitted that recruiting staff had been a problem and that it had cut the number of children held from 80 to 60. Figures released at the same time showed that pain had been used on 110 occasions in 2006 and other restraints had been used 921 times.
- [July 2008](#) – The Court of Appeal quashes the STC amendment rules, which allow force to be used on children for good order and discipline. Lord Justice Buxton said the restraint methods amounted to ‘inhuman and degrading treatment’ contrary to the ECHR.
- [January 2010](#) – Following an inspection of Medway, the Howard League calls Ofsted ‘naïve’ and branded the report “so superficial as to be almost meaningless”. The letter to the Chief Executive of Ofsted, from Frances Crook, also condemned the report for being ‘blithely uncritical’ of issues surrounding restraint.
- [July 2010](#) – After a five-year Freedom of Information battle, the government released the restraint manual for use in STCs. It reveals that staff were authorised to “use an inverted knuckle into the trainee’s sternum and drive inward and upward”; “continue to carry alternate elbow strikes to the young person’s ribs until a release is achieved”; and “drive straight fingers into the young person’s face, and then quickly drive the straightened fingers of the same hand downwards into the young person’s groin area”.
- [January 2011](#) – The second inquest into the death of Adam Rickwood concludes that the unlawful use of force by officers on him contributed to his decision to take his own life and that there had been widespread, unlawful use of restraint against children.
- [January 2012](#) - The High Court ruled that the unlawful use of restraint had been widespread in the STCs for at least a decade.
- [May 2015](#) – The inspection of Rainsbrook reveals that children were subjected to degrading treatment and racist comments and some staff were under the influence of illegal drugs. The inspection report revealed that staff had smuggled in ‘inappropriate’ DVDs. Children were restrained 166 times in six months – 72 of these restraint incidents were in response to children harming themselves. Despite this, the Youth Justice Board announced the next day that [G4S had been granted an extension for its contract](#) at Medway

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