Harm in the name of justice:
20 years on from the Carlile Inquiry into the treatment of children in custody

Howard League for Penal Reform

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Introduction

In 2006, the Howard League published the findings of an independent inquiry, led by Lord Carlile of Berriew KC, into the use of restraint, solitary confinement and strip searching in custodial establishments holding children.[1] The inquiry was established following the death of Gareth Myatt, a 15-year-old boy who died while being restrained by officers at a secure training centre. The central findings of the inquiry included recommendations that restraint should never be used as a punishment or to secure compliance; that the infliction of pain was unacceptable and may be unlawful; that prison segregation units should not be used for children; and that strip-searching should be risk-led and not routine.

In 2016, the Howard League published a report, *The Carlile Inquiry 10 years on*, reflecting on what had changed for children in custody in the decade since the inquiry.[2] We reported that some progress had been made: the number of children in custody had reduced significantly and routine strip searching had ended and been replaced by a risk-led approach. However, the rate of restraint had doubled in five years, levels of force involving the deliberate infliction of pain were high, segregation units remained in use, and there was a new, widespread practice of holding children in conditions of solitary confinement on main prison wings.

This report reflects on the decade since our last report, and what has, and has not, changed in the areas of concern first examined by the inquiry more than 20 years ago. It is informed by calls to the Howard League's legal advice line from thousands of children and young people in custody in England and Wales, who have shared their experiences of being detained. The picture remains bleak.

As this report is concerned with developments since 2006, it does not consider in detail the shocking findings of the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigation into widespread physical and sexual abuse of more than 2,000 young people in Medomsley

1. Lord Carlile of Berriew KC (formerly QC), *An independent inquiry into the use of physical restraint, solitary confinement and forcible strip searching of children in prisons, secure training centres and local authority secure children's homes* (The Howard League for Penal Reform 2006) https://howardleague.org/publications/carlile-report/ accessed 23 October 2026

2. The Howard League for Penal Reform, *The Carlile Inquiry 10 years on: The use of restraint, solitary confinement and strip-searching on children* (2016) https://howardleague.org/publications/the-carlile-inquiry-10-years-on/ accessed 23 October 2026

detention centre, in County Durham, between 1961 and 1987.[3] Readers are encouraged to read the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman's report, which was published in 2025, and reflect on its observations that the complaints process for children in custody remains the same today as it was when Medomsley was in operation, and that there remains no requirement for an independent person or body that proactively asks children about their custodial experience through a safeguarding lens. The Prisons and Probation Ombudsman investigation, and the myriad concerns in this report, show that there can be no complacency as to the treatment of children and young people in custody today.

3. Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, *Investigation into the failing of Medomsley Detention Centre between 1961 and 1987* (2025) https://ppo.gov.uk/news/ppo-publish-investigation-report-into-abuse-of-young-men-at-medomsley-detention-centre/ accessed 27 October 2026

A changing estate

The number of children in custody in England and Wales has continued to decrease steadily. At the time of the inquiry, almost 3,000 children were detained; 10 years later, the figure had fallen below 1,000. As of August 2026, there were fewer than 350 children in custody, almost all of whom were boys. There is also a significant proportion – about 18% - of young people aged 18 or older held in the children's secure estate and this is set to increase further, due to capacity pressures in the adult estate.[4]

The welcome reduction in the number of children in the secure estate has not been matched by a proportionate decrease in the use of remand, however. In the year ending March 2025, children on remand accounted for 44% of the average custodial population, yet almost two-thirds of children remanded to custody did not ultimately receive a custodial sentence. Children from minority ethnic groups were also overrepresented in the custodial remand population, with Black children making up more than one-quarter of those remanded.[5] Often periods on remand are short, with about a hundred children every year being remanded only to be bailed or released to local authority accommodation less than two weeks later.[6] The Ministry of Justice has committed to reducing custodial remands of children by 25% by July 2029. The impact of this pledge has yet to be seen.

The structure of the children's secure estate has undergone substantial further changes over the last 10 years.

In terms of governance, in September 2017, responsibility for the day-to-day running of the children's secure estate was transferred from the Youth Justice Board to the Youth Custody Service, which was established as a distinct part of HM Prison and Probation

4. UK Parliament, 'Youth custody. Question for Ministry of Justice', *Written questions, answers and statements* (UIN 28462, 9 September 2026) https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-questions/detail/2026-09-09/28462/ accessed 23 October 2026; and Youth Justice Board, *Youth custody data* (August 2026) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-custody-data accessed 23 October 2026. Table 1.1 & 1.3

5. Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, *Youth Justice Statistics: 2024 to 2025* (2026) https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025/youth-justice-statistics-2024-to-2025 accessed 23 October 2026

6. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Children on short-term remand* (2026) https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2026/05/Children-on-short-term-remand-web-2026.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

Service. Further changes to the Youth Justice Board followed in 2026, when activities relating to the development, funding and monitoring of government policy and the wider youth justice system were transferred to the Ministry of Justice. As this report shows, these changes in governance have not led to better outcomes.

The Urgent Notifications flagged serious concerns about the safety of children in four establishments, resulting in the closure of two: Rainsbrook secure training centre, which closed in 2021, and Cookham Wood young offender institution, which was repurposed to hold adults in 2024.

Following the closure of Rainsbrook, an unprecedented decision was made to place girls at Wetherby, a young offender institution for boys. Following campaigning and the threat of legal action by the Howard League, an independent review into the placement and care of girls in youth custody was commissioned by the Ministry of Justice. This led to the practice of girls being placed in Wetherby stopping in 2025.[7]

There are now four young offender institutions (Feltham A, Werrington and Wetherby in England, and Parc in Wales), and one remaining secure training centre (Oakhill, in England). Retendering of youth justice beds in secure children's homes resulted in a reduction in the number of secure children's homes from eight to seven (six in England, one in Wales). Oasis Restore secure school, which is a dual registered secure children's home and secure 16 to 19 academy, run by the Oasis Charitable Trust, has opened.

Most children and young people in custody continue to be held in young offender institutions, despite the very high levels of violence and poor regimes there. The number of children placed in secure children's homes remained relatively small over the past decade; as of August 2026, only 19% of children and young people were placed in secure children's homes, with only a handful in the secure school, which has faced significant difficulties since it opened in 2024.[8]

A shrinking estate means that children and young people are placed further away from home. In August 2026, more than one-quarter of children and young people were placed more than 75 miles from home, including 75 children and young people who were 100 or more miles from home.[9]

Despite the smaller number of children and young people in custody, the conditions for those held there are arguably now worse than ever. In his 2025-26 annual report on the experiences of children and young people in custody, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons reported that children in prisons in England "continue to be locked behind their doors for much too long – as much as 19 hours a day in Feltham and only marginally less in Werrington and Wetherby". Education provision was described as "awful", levels of violence as "much too high" and relationships as "not good enough".[10]

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7. Ministry of Justice, *Government response to the independent review: Delivering the best for girls in custody* (2025) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/delivering-the-best-for-girls-in-custody-government-response/government-response-to-the-independent-review-delivering-the-best-for-girls-in-custody accessed 23 October 2026

8. Youth Justice Board, *Youth custody data* (n4). Table 1.8

9. Youth Justice Board, *Youth custody data* (n4). Table 1.11

10. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Children in custody 2025–26* (2026) https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/children-in-custody-2025-26/ accessed 23 October 2026

Children and young people in custody remain some of the most vulnerable in society. Many will have experienced multiple adverse childhood experiences impacting on their physical and mental health. Of all the children in the criminal justice system, 80% either have an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or receive special educational needs and disability (SEND) support.[11]

11. Michael Sieff Foundation, *Justice for children with SEND & neurodivergence* (2025) https://www.michaelsieff-foundation.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/04/SEND-Neurodivergence-and-Youth-Justice-Report-Sieff-Foundation-2025.pdf accessed 23 October 2026


MAIN ENTRANCE
ALL DRIVERS MUST SWITCH OFF ENGINES
WELCOME TO
HMYOI WETHERBY
SMOKING IS NOT PERMITTED

Restraint

In 2016, the Howard League reported that restraint was still being used too readily on children in custody, with rates having doubled between 2011 and 2016.[12] Unfortunately, things have got even worse since then.

Between 2016 and 2026, the rate at which force is used against children and young people held in young offender institutions has more than trebled and in secure training centres has more than doubled.[13] In their most recent annual report, HM Inspectorate of Prisons noted that use of force is a "regular feature of life in both YOIs [young offender institutions] and Oakhill STC [secure training centre]", with more than two-thirds of children (68%) reporting having been restrained by staff.[14]

The rate of restraint in secure children's homes has decreased in the last six years (the period for which data is available). However, the rate of restraint in the year ending March 2026 had increased by more than one-third as compared to the previous 12-month period.[15]

In the last decade, there have been 1,800 instances of restraint in young offender institutions and secure training centres where there have been warning signs of medical distress, including 135 incidents in the 12-month period ending March 2026.[16]

12. The Howard League, *The Carlile Inquiry 10 years on* (n2)

13. Ministry of Justice and Youth Justice Board, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate: Update to March 2026* (2026), https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-the-children-and-young-people-secure-estate-update-to-march-2026 accessed 23 October 2026. Table 3.2.1

14. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Children in custody 2025–26* (n10)

15. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 3.2.1

16. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 3.2.1

Protected characteristics

In 2006, the Carlile Inquiry reported concerns that there was no ethnicity monitoring with regard to the use of restraint. However, it was not until July 2023 that the Ministry of Justice began to publish annual data on the use of force, disaggregated by ethnicity and religion.

The published data for the last four years shows that Black and Mixed Ethnicity children and young people in custody have persistently had force used against them at higher rates than any other children. Muslim children and young people have, until 2026, also had force used against them at higher rates than children and young people of other religions. The disproportionate use of force against racialised and Muslim children and young people is well known by the government, but nothing has been done to explain or address it.[17]

The inquiry also recommended in 2006 that data on the use of force should be disaggregated by disability. More than 20 years later, data on disability is still not published by the government.

Girls have been restrained at much higher rates than boys every year in the last decade. Data for the year ending March 2026 showed that girls were restrained at almost three times the rate of boys.[18]

Use of pain against children in custody

The Carlile Inquiry found that the use of restraint techniques that deliberately caused pain to children were unacceptable and may be unlawful.

Following legal action by children's rights charity Article 39, an independent review of pain-inducing techniques in young offender institutions and secure training centres was established in 2018. The review, led by Charlie Taylor, published a report in 2020 which made 15 recommendations aimed at ensuring that restraint techniques which deliberately cause pain are only ever used as a last resort, and that appropriate mechanisms are in place to govern the use of restraint.[19]

In 2021, in response to the Taylor review, the Independent Restraint Review Panel was established. Its role is to assess the safety of the use of restraint in secure training centres and young offender institutions and make recommendations on how to improve and develop better practices.

In 2023, the government responded to the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse. The inquiry had concluded in 2019, and again in 2022, that pain-inducing techniques were a form of child abuse and their use should be prohibited. The government did not accept this recommendation and said that there would be

17. Youth Justice Board and Ministry of Justice, *Youth justice statistics* https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/youth-justice-statistics accessed 23 October 2026

18. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 3.4.1

19. Charlie Taylor, *Independent review of the use of pain-inducing techniques in the youth secure estate* (Ministry of Justice 2020) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-review-of-the-use-of-pain-inducing-techniques-in-the-youth-secure-estate accessed 23 October 2026

"an intentionally separate package of emergency interventions which are reserved for scenarios where they may need to prevent serious physical harm to other children".[20]

In 2024, an updated policy framework on the use of force in the children's secure estate came into force. The policy said that restraint techniques which deliberately cause pain could not be used, but that "emergency intervention techniques", which involve the use of pain, may be used where there is a risk to life, or threat of serious physical harm or a life-changing injury.

The use of restraint techniques which deliberately cause pain has reduced significantly in the last decade, from 7.7% to 0.4% of all incidents of restraint in young offender institutions.[21] However, there remain concerns about the circumstances in which these techniques are used. The Independent Restraint Review Panel found that, of the 11 uses of pain inducing techniques in 2025, only seven were assessed as meeting the policy criteria.[22] This year, HM Inspectorate of Prisons reported that at Wetherby prison "pain-inducing techniques had been used on 11 occasions (10 mandibular and one inverted wrist flexion), compared with nine previously. These techniques were not always applied appropriately or proportionately, and leaders had acted where staff practice fell short."[23] Similar concerns were raised about Werrington prison in 2025.[24]

A significant proportion of incidents involve the use of restraint techniques that are not designed to cause pain, but where pain is a likely outcome. In the two years ending March 2026 (the only period for which such data is available), more than 1,500 instances of restraint in young offender institutions (about one-quarter) and more than 200 instances of restraint in the secure training centre (about 30%) involved the use of restraint techniques where pain was a likely outcome.[25]

The introduction of PAVA spray

In April 2025, the government announced that Pelargonic acid vanillylamide (PAVA) spray would be rolled out for use in young offender institutions in England for a 12-month period. PAVA is a chemical irritant spray that can cause severe pain. It is classified as a prohibited weapon under the Firearms Act 1968, but it has been authorised for use in prisons.

An equality impact assessment prepared by the government prior to the decision to roll out PAVA found that Black children, Muslim children and children with disabilities were likely to be particularly adversely affected by the decision.

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20. HM Government, *Response to the final report of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse* (2023) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/response-to-the-final-report-of-the-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse accessed 23 October 2026

21. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 3.2.2

22. HM Prison & Probation Service, *Independent Restraint Review Panel (IRRP) summary report to end 2025* (2026) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-restraint-review-panel-irrp-summary-report-2025/independent-restraint-review-panel-irrp-summary-report-to-end-2025 accessed 23 October 2026

23. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Wetherby* (2026) https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2026/01/HMYOI-WETHERBY-web-2025.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

24. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Werrington (*2025) https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2025/07/Werrington-2025-web.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

25. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 3.2.2

The Howard League v the Secretary of State for Justice (2025): PAVA in young offender institutions in England

In April 2025, the government announced that PAVA spray would be authorised for use for 12 months in three prisons holding children: Feltham A, in west London; Werrington, in Staffordshire; and Wetherby, in West Yorkshire.

This decision was opposed by the Howard League, as well as dozens of other organisations and individuals working in children's rights and youth justice. The Youth Justice Board, the Children's Commissioner for England, the Independent Monitoring Boards and the British Association of Social Workers all issued critical statements in response.

The Howard League brought a legal challenge to the decision on the basis that the government had failed to understand and investigate sufficiently:

- the physical and psychological damage that PAVA spray would cause to children in custody;
- the likely discriminatory use of PAVA spray against Black and minority ethnic children, Muslim children and children with disabilities; and
- whether introducing PAVA spray would increase violence and cause more harm overall.

Unfortunately, the case was unsuccessful. In concluding that the government's decision to authorise the use of PAVA was lawful, the judge, Mr Justice Calver, said: "It is plain that the Secretary of State was closely involved in the formation of the PAVA policy and was insistent upon thorough safeguards being introduced concerning its use, as well as constant 'live' monitoring and oversight of the limited use of PAVA which she expected to be extremely rare in view of the limitations upon its use: viz, as a last resort, and only where there is an immediate threat of life-changing or life-ending violence."

Figures provided to the Howard League in response to a Freedom of Information Act request show that in the first few months of deployment, PAVA spray was drawn and used in Feltham A and Werrington prisons against 33 children and young people in total. Of the 33 children and young people who had PAVA spray used against them, 18 were Black and six were white. Despite comprising only about 30% of the population, Black children and young people had PAVA spray used against them about 55% of the time.

It has not been possible to obtain information on the extent to which PAVA is used against children and young people with disabilities, as this data is not comprehensively collected and collated by the Ministry of Justice.

In its 2025 report, the Independent Restraint Review Panel reviewed eight instances of PAVA deployment across six incidents. It found about half of the deployments either

did not meet the policy guidance or there was insufficient evidence to show that the guidance had been satisfied.[26]

Despite this, the use of PAVA has been authorised for a further 12 months.

Unlawful use of restraint

Concerns about the inappropriate use of force are not limited to PAVA or other techniques that deliberately cause pain. The Howard League regularly advises and advocates for children who are concerned that force has not been used as a last resort, or that the level of force used was excessive, causing injury. We continue to hear from children who are reluctant to complain because they don't feel they will be believed, or who have complained but it has made no difference. As the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman has noted, the complaints process for children in custody remains broadly the same today as it was when Medomsley detention centre was in operation. Medomsley closed in 1987.[27]

In 2024, HM Inspectorate of Prisons raised concerns about male staff cutting the clothes off a vulnerable girl under restraint.[28]

HM Inspectorate of Prisons have also raised concerns about failures to follow governance structures, which undermines oversight and scrutiny of poor practice in the use of force. In 2025, inspectors found that at Feltham A prison there was a substantial backlog in use of force documentation and body-worn cameras were not consistently worn or activated by staff during incidents involving restraint.[29] Similar concerns were raised this year by inspectors about body-worn cameras not being routinely worn or activated during incidents at Wetherby prison.[30] The inadequacy of governance and assurance processes at Oakhill secure training centre has been a recurrent theme across inspection reports in the last decade, and despite two Urgent Notifications being issued in respect of Oakhill in 2021 and 2025, the latest inspection report in June 2026 raised continued concerns of "weak management oversight" of the use of restraint.[31]

Concerns have also been raised by inspectors about the inappropriate use of restraint at the secure children's homes and the secure school.

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26. HM Prison & Probation Service, *Independent Restraint Review Panel (IRRP) summary report to end 2025* (n21)

27. Prisons and Probation Ombudsman, *Investigation into the failing of Medomsley Detention Centre between 1961 and 1987* (n3)

28. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Wetherby* (2024) https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2024/03/Wetherby-web-2023-1.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

29. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Feltham A* (2025) https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2025/08/HMYOI-Feltham-web-2025-1.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

30. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Wetherby* (n23)

31. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *A full inspection of Oakhill Secure Training Centre, undertaken jointly with Ofsted* (15-19 June 2026) https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2026/07/Oakhill_STC_1027077_annual_Jun26_0.pdf accessed 26 October 2026

Compliance

One of the key recommendations of the Carlile Inquiry was that restraint should not be used to force children and young people to do as they are told. Use of force to secure compliance is not used in secure children's homes and was banned in secure training centres in 2008 following the case of "C".[32] However, children continued to be restrained in young offender institutions for "passive non-compliance".

Figures provided to the Howard League show that in the three-year period ending March 2025, 612 children and young people had force used against them for "passive non-compliance", and the number of incidents doubled within that period. The data for the year ending 2025 shows a disproportionate use of restraint for non-compliance against Black children and young people.

32. *R (C) v Secretary of State for Justice [2008] EWCA Civ 882, [2009] QB 657*


MAIN ENTRANCE
WELCOME TO
HMYOI WETHERBY

Segregation

In 2006, the Carlile Inquiry reported on the largely hidden world of prison segregation, describing segregation units as “little more than bare, dark and dank cells that exacerbate underlying risks and vulnerabilities”. The inquiry called for segregation units not to be used for children.

Twenty years on, segregation units continue to be used in young offender institutions, with conditions variable across establishments. However, as we reported in 2016, there is now a widespread practice of holding children in conditions of solitary confinement on normal residential wings, with some children spending 22 or more hours in their cell each day.

In 2017, the Howard League brought a legal challenge on behalf of a child (known as “AB”) who had been locked alone in his cell in a young offender institution for a prolonged period of time.

R (on the application of AB) v the Secretary of State for Justice (2017); AB v UK (2023)

In 2017, the Howard League brought a legal challenge on behalf of a “AB”, a 15-year-old boy who was routinely locked in his cell in a young offender institution for more than 22 hours each day.

The High Court found that for a total of 127 days the prison failed to comply with its own rules around the removal of children from the usual regime in prison, which was unlawful. These rules, known as the Young Offender Institution Rules 2000, impose a range of safeguards and procedures to be put in place in light of the risks associated with isolation.

In response to the court’s decision, the government extended oversight arrangements to all children spending more than 22 hours a day in their cell, regardless of whether or not they had been “removed from association” in accordance with Rule 49 of the Young Offender Institution Rules. The aim

was that management oversight would improve the regime that these children received.

The same rules require that children in prison get at least 15 hours of education a week: AB had no education at all for the first 55 days at Feltham A prison, and only 15 hours in total in a two-month period before the hearing. This was found by the court to be unlawful.

The court stopped short of finding that AB's rights under Article 3 of the European Convention on Human Rights (ECHR), which prohibits torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, had been breached. However, in 2023, after the case was brought to the European Court of Human Rights, the government settled the case and agreed to pay AB £31,500 in damages. It acknowledged that, in the particular circumstances of AB's case, his Article 3 ECHR rights had been breached.

While AB's case progressed through the courts, concern about the solitary confinement of children in England and Wales grew, with medics, parliamentarians and children's rights experts among those calling for change.

In 2018, the British Medical Association, the Royal College of Psychiatrists and the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health issued a joint position statement calling for the solitary confinement of children and young people to be abolished and prohibited. The three medical bodies said: "In light of its potential to cause harm, and in the absence of compelling evidence for its use, we call for an end to the use of solitary confinement on children and young people detained in the youth justice system." [33] Later that year, a report by the Children's Commissioner for England also raised serious concerns about the use of segregation and isolation of children in custody.[34]

In 2019, a report by the Joint Committee on Human Rights pointed to "evidence over several years" that children in detention can "end up in what amounts to solitary confinement (at least 22 hours per day without meaningful contact) which may be prolonged (at least 15 days' duration)". The report added: "This breach of children's rights is not a policy decision by the government, but it is within the power of government to prevent it."[35]

In 2020, HM Inspectorate of Prisons published a report on the separation of children in prison, which found that policy reforms introduced following AB had been "unsuccessful". In the spring of 2019, 10% of children were separated under Rule 49 of the Young Offender Institution Rules. Two-thirds of those children were separated on

33. British Medical Association, *Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health and Royal College of Psychiatrists, Joint position statement on solitary confinement of children and young people in youth detention* (2018) https://www.bma.org.uk/media/1859/bma-solitary-confinement-in-youth-detention-joint-statement-2018.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

34. Children's Commissioner for England, *A report on the use of segregation in youth custody in England* (2018) https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/resource/a-report-on-the-use-of-segregation-in-youth-custody-in-england/ accessed 23 October 2026

35. Joint Committee on Human Rights, *Youth detention: solitary confinement and restraint* (2017–19, HL 343, HC 994) https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/jt201719/jtselect/jtrights/994/99402.htm accessed 23 October 2026

normal residential units which were “particularly grim”. Inspectors found children who were “unable to access the very basics of everyday life, including a daily shower and telephone call”. In the worst cases, children left their cells for only 15 minutes a day. Other children were informally separated, spending more than 22 hours a day in their cell. The report added: “The weaknesses of current practice and oversight are of such a magnitude that we recommend an entirely new approach, and that current practice be replaced.”[36]

In response, the government established a taskforce in 2020 charged with making “immediate, medium and long-term recommendations … about operational practice, policy and information gathering requirements”. The taskforce made 18 recommendations to improve practice, improve leadership and increase accountability.[37]

However, in a follow-up report in 2024, HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that “four years later almost all of [the] failings [identified in the 2020 report] continue”. Inspectors found that “many children continued to be subject to solitary confinement and unable to access the basics, including exercise. Leaders were unable to provide most separated children with adequate access to education and other interventions, which in some cases were limited to just a few minutes a day. In the worst cases, on some days, children did not leave their cell.”[38]

The Howard League regularly receives calls on our legal advice line from or about children who are held in conditions of solitary confinement. Children held on segregation units are not always clear on why they have been segregated, with “intelligence” being cited as a reason for segregating them. They are often being held in conditions amounting to solitary confinement and are not clear about what targets they need to meet to bring their segregation to an end. The Howard League has repeatedly raised concerns about the lack of opportunity for oversight by external agencies and parents, who are not always aware that a child has been segregated and are not always routinely invited to reviews.

The Howard League v the Secretary of State for Justice (2025): separation of children at Oakhill secure training centre

Concerns about the separation of children in custody are not limited to those held in young offender institutions.

In 2021, Rainsbrook secure training centre was closed after inspectors found that children there were being held in their rooms for 23.5 hours a day for days and weeks at a time.

36. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Separation of children in young offender institutions: A review of progress* (2024) https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/separation-of-children-in-young-offender-institutions-review-of-progress/ accessed 23 October 2026

37. Youth Custody Service, *Findings of the Separation Taskforce* (2020) https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5eeb4795e90e07644e3b8f39/separation-taskforce-findings.pdf accessed 23 October 2026

38. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Separation of children in young offender institutions* (n36)

In 2025, the Howard League successfully challenged a policy at Oakhill, the only remaining secure training centre, that enabled children and young people to be locked in their rooms, by themselves, for longer than the law allows.

Staff were told that they could keep a child alone in their room for longer than three hours in a 24-hour period, if they observed and spoke to the child through their door at five-minute intervals. This was contrary to Rule 36(3) of the secure training centre rules, which imposes a clear three-hour time limit on the separation, even if a child is observed.

After permission was granted by the High Court, and following a damning Ofsted inspection, the government settled the case, amending its policy to make it compliant with the law.

Published data

Data on the segregation of children in secure children's homes and secure training centres has been published annually since 2014. In July 2023, the Ministry of Justice started to publish annual data on the segregation of children and young people in young offender institutions.

Young offender institutions

The rate of separation in young offender institutions has increased in the last four years. In the year ending March 2026, there had been 948 separations lasting for more than 12,000 days in total, at an average rate of more than three separations per child per year.[39]

In each of the last four years, the average length of each separation incident ranged between about 12 and 15 days. In the year ending March 2026, children and young people were separated for an average of about 13 days, with significant variation between prisons.[40] In 2024, HM Inspectorate of Prisons reported that 21 children had been separated for more than 100 days.[41]

Data also shows that Black, "Mixed" Ethnicity and "Other" Ethnicity children and young people were, variously between April 2022 and March 2025, segregated at a disproportionate rate. In the year ending March 2023, Black children were 50% more likely to be segregated than white children. In the years ending March 2024 and March 2025, Black, Mixed Ethnicity and Other Ethnicity children were all more likely to be segregated than white children.[42]

The most recently published data for the 12 months ending March 2026 does not show a continued disproportionality in the use of segregation in young offender institutions,

39. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 5.2
40. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 5.2
41. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Separation of children in young offender institutions* (n36)
42. YJB and MoJ, *Youth justice statistics* (n17)

with Black and white children (who, together, make up about two-thirds of the children in young offender institutions), being segregated at similar rates. However, it does show that some racially minoritised children spend longer in segregation when they are segregated, in particular Asian children who spend an average of 18.3 days in segregation, which is much longer, on average, than children of any other ethnicity.[43]

Secure children's homes and secure training centres

The rate of separation in secure children's homes has more than halved since April 2019, and the average length of separation in the 12 months ending March 2026 was the lowest it has been in seven years.[44]

In contrast, the rate of separation has increased significantly in the secure training centres, more than doubling since April 2019. The average duration of separation has also increased significantly, from 37 minutes per day to 2 hours and 37 minutes.[45]

Data for the year ending March 2026 shows that Black and Mixed Ethnicity children were disproportionately separated in both secure children's homes and secure training centres, with Black children spending longer, on average, than other children when they are separated, particularly in secure children's homes.[46]

The impact of the Covid pandemic

The Howard League already had significant concerns about a decline in the conditions in which children and young people were being held in young offender institutions prior to the Covid pandemic, as highlighted in the case of AB. However, the pandemic made things significantly worse.

In response to the pandemic, the regime in prisons holding children was severely restricted. Children calling the Howard League's legal advice line in the first few months of the pandemic described being kept in conditions amounting to solitary confinement, without face-to-face education or mental health support.

Decisions made during the pandemic also had a long-lasting impact on regime once restrictions were lifted. During the pandemic, children were put into smaller groups and did not mix with other children outside of their group, creating conflict between the groups. When restrictions were lifted, the number of "keep-aparts" increased dramatically, causing significant challenges in offering a consistent regime, and reducing the amount of time that staff had to build relationships with children.

In 2024, HM Inspectorate of Prisons reported that young offender institutions "have become characterised by a vicious cycle of high levels of conflict, resulting in complicated 'keep-apart' lists, which in turn reduce time out of cell for all children. This often leads to more conflict, as children with little else to do antagonise other groups by disrupting the daily routine or shouting abuse at their counterparts. Until this cycle

43. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 5.4
44. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 4.2.2
45. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 4.2.2
46. MoJ, *Safety in the Children and Young People Secure Estate* (n13). Table 4.4

is broken, it is hard to see how the decline in time out of cell, and access to education, skills and work, can be addressed."[47]

The current position

Data collected by the Howard League for almost three years shows that children and young people in young offender institutions in England are still typically being kept in their cells for about 20 hours a day on average, with less time out at weekends. Within this average, there will be children who are getting a lot of time out of their cells, and correspondingly children who are getting much less.

Data also shows that, on average, children receive significantly less than 15 hours of education per week. HM Inspectorate of Prisons and Ofsted have also raised concerns about reduced time out of cell and declining access to education in prisons holding children. A thematic report published in 2024 sets out a bleak picture of steadily declining educational opportunities and quality, reduced work experience and work opportunities, and sharply reduced time out of cell for children.[48]

In his 2025-26 annual report on the experience of children in custody, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons reported that "the fundamental problem in purposeful activity was the quality of education, skills and work. This was only judged to be good enough at Parc prison and was inadequate at all three of the young offender institutions in England. Across the estate, 16% of children reported that they were not doing any education, work or offending behaviour interventions and many more did not receive enough contact time to make progress."[49]

47. Ofsted and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *A decade of declining quality of education in young offender institutions: the systemic shortcomings that fail children* (2024) https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thematic-review-of-the-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-yois/a-decade-of-declining-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-the-systemic-shortcomings-that-fail-children accessed 23 October 2026

48. Ofsted and HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *A decade of declining quality of education* (n47)

49. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Children in custody 2025–26* (n10)

Strip searching

In 2006, the Carlile Inquiry recommended that routine strip searching of children should end and be replaced by a risk-led approach. After continued campaigning by the Howard League, this new approach was adopted in 2014, other than for restricted status children (those who have been assessed as needing to be held in higher security conditions). In the 2016 report, the Howard League reported that, while routine strip searching had ended, concerns remained that too many children were still being strip searched, including some who were being strip searched under restraint unnecessarily.

Data on the strip searching of children is not published, and prior to 2024, the Youth Custody Service did not even gather data from individual institutions to analyse it centrally. Figures obtained by the Howard League show that in the year ending March 2026, 134 boys in young offender institutions were strip searched, which is a reduction since the last report.

In 2025, HM Inspectorate of Prisons reported that the introduction of improved oversight at Wetherby prison had given leaders greater assurance about the necessity and proportionality of strip searching, leading to a reduction in the number of searches.[50] However, HM Inspectorate of Prisons also reported in 2025 that, of the 41 children strip searched in the previous 12-month period at Feltham prison, illicit items had only been found in 39% of cases. This suggests that more must be done to ensure that intelligence is accurate and robust before a strip search is authorised.

It is understood that restricted status children can be routinely strip searched. A thematic review by HM Inspectorate of Prisons in 2023 on the experiences of restricted status children found "that this frequent and routine searching was only justified in one of 21 cases we reviewed. For most children, searches resulted in very few finds of any significance. Based on data from both restricted status children's sites, only 5% of cell searches (two out of 37) and only 4% of strip searches had resulted in finds, and none of the items found suggested an increased risk of escape. The practice of routine strip searching was not based on intelligence or an assessment of the child's risks. In one case a child told us that he was strip searched four times every day when travelling from prison to court and back."[51] Practice in this area remains opaque: when the Howard League requested information about the relevant policy framework, disclosure was refused for security reasons.

50. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Wetherby* (n23)

51. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Restricted status children and prisoners held in women's establishments* (2023) https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/restricted-status-children-and-prisoners-held-in-womens-establishments/ accessed 23 October 2026



Conclusion

The reduction in the number of children in custody over the last 20 years is significant, but for those children who do end up in custody, and particularly those placed in young offender institutions or the secure training centre, the impact continues to be highly disruptive and hugely damaging.

Custody should always be a last resort for children, but the number of children on remand has remained consistent over the last 10 years, despite the overall population falling. The government has committed to reducing the use of remand and this must be an area of continued focus, with sufficient resourcing made available to enable local authorities to provide children at risk of remand with appropriate support while they await trial and sentencing.

Recent changes to sentencing for adults, in response to the overcrowding crisis in adult prisons, do not include children. As a result, some children will now spend longer in prison than adults serving sentences of the same length. Legislation must be brought as a matter of priority to remedy this, and to ensure that children are spending the shortest possible time in custody, if custody cannot be avoided altogether.

And for those for whom custody is unavoidable, things must change. Rates of restraint continue to soar, with techniques that deliberately or otherwise cause children pain being used routinely, and with insufficient scrutiny or oversight. Children in prison are being held in solitary confinement, in segregation units but also locked in cells on residential wings without access to adequate, high-quality education or time in the fresh air.

In 2026, HM Inspectorate of Prisons reported that 39% of children in young offender institutions and the secure training centre had felt unsafe at some point. Only half of children said they felt cared for by most staff and one in three children said there was no one they could turn to for help.[52] The vast majority of children who go into custody have experienced higher levels of trauma, abuse, loss and other adversity compared to children in the general population. Being placed in a violent, volatile environment compounds this.

52. HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, *Children in custody 2025–26* (n10)

At the time of writing this report, the Ministry of Justice is consulting on its youth custody transformation plan. This plan must be evidence-based, ambitious and properly resourced if it is to have any chance of delivering meaningful change for children in custody.

Any plan must provide a gender-responsive, individualised approach for girls. It must also engage with the experiences of racially and religiously minoritised children and young people in custody and set out a clear, measurable plan for addressing disproportionality, including the disproportionate use of restraint and separation. It must also identify and better support children with disabilities, whose needs are inadequately understood and supported at present, and who report even worse experiences in custody than those without disabilities.

The government must also deliver on its commitment to close prisons for children. Those children who do need to be in custody must be placed in small, local units, and not in young offender institutions or secure training centres.

In the 20 years since the Carlile Inquiry was first published, so much harm to children has been done in the name of justice. The government's promise of change will need to be genuinely transformative if the Howard League is not to report on another decade of failure in 2036.

Timeline of a changing estate

At the start of 2016, there were five young offender institutions, three secure training centres and eight secure children's homes in England and Wales.

2016

In July, the running of Medway secure training centre, where allegations of abuse, coercion and falsification of records emerged under G4S management, is transferred to the public sector.

In December, the Taylor Review is published. It recommends moving away from young offender institutions and secure training centres towards secure schools with a stronger educational focus. The government accepts this recommendation.

2017

In September, the Youth Custody Service is established as a distinct part of HM Prison and Probation Service, with responsibility for the operational running of the children's secure estate.

2019

In February, the statutory Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse publishes its investigation report *Sexual Abuse of Children in Custodial Institutions: 2009-2017*. This report documents 1,070 reported incidents of alleged sexual abuse in the children's secure estate between 2009 and 2017 and concludes that "there is little doubt that YOIs [young offender institutions] and STCs [secure training centres] were in crisis by the end of the Inquiry's investigation period".

In July, inspectors issue an Urgent Notification for Feltham A prison after "a collapse in performance and outcomes for children being held there" resulting in significant safeguarding concerns and high levels of restraint and segregation.

2020

In March, Medway secure training centre is closed following continued concerns about the treatment of children and young people held there.

In December, inspectors issue an Urgent Notification at Rainsbrook secure training centre following serious concerns about the care, safety and well-being of children there.

2021

In June, inspectors issue a second Urgent Notification at Rainsbrook secure training centre, where children were being locked in their rooms for 23.5 hours a day for days and weeks at a time.

All children are removed from Rainsbrook in response to the Urgent Notification. Girls are placed in Wetherby young offender institution, a prison for boys.

In July, inspectors issue an Urgent Notification for Oakhill, by now the only remaining secure training centre.

2022

From November, girls are placed in Oakhill.

2023

In April, inspectors issue an Urgent Notification for Cookham Wood prison due to a complete breakdown of behaviour management, solitary confinement becoming normalised and children feeling unsafe.

2025

In March, Susannah Hancock's report, *Girls placement review report: Delivering the best for girls in custody*, recommends ending the use of young offender institutions for girls immediately and phasing out secure training centre placements for girls by 2029.

In July, a second Urgent Notification is issued for Oakhill secure training centre in response to 'profoundly serious and systemic failures' that left children at risk of harm, alongside serious safeguarding weaknesses, concerns about staff conduct, and continued use of outdated pain-inducing restraint techniques.

In August, the Oasis Restore secure school closes after only a year following serious safety concerns raised by Ofsted. At the time of closure, only 10 children are living there.

2024

In March, the government announces that children will no longer be held at Cookham Wood prison. The prison is rerolled in August as a Category C prison for adults.

In May, Oasis Restore, England's first secure school, opens on the former site of Medway secure training centre with capacity for up to 49 children. The school opens four years late and £35 million over budget.

2025 continued...

In November, the Prisons and Probation Ombudsman publishes a report into the horrific abuse of children and young people at Medomsley Detention Centre in Durham from the 1960s until its closure in the late 1980s, prompting a review of safeguarding by the Chief Social Worker.

Retendering for youth justice beds places in secure children's homes is completed in 2025 – seven (previously eight) of the 14 secure children's homes in England and Wales have beds commissioned by the Youth Custody Service.

2026

In May, the government publishes a youth justice White Paper which includes a commitment to move away from large custodial institutions (like young offender institutions) towards smaller, more rehabilitative settings. The government also commits to publishing a Youth Custody Transformation Plan in autumn 2026, detailing how the government will implement this transition in the following 10 years. The role of the Youth Justice Board is also to be reformed, with activities relating to the development, funding and monitoring of government policy and the wider youth justice system to be transferred to the Ministry of Justice.

2026 continued...

In June, the Oasis Restore secure school partially reopens following a year of closure. Shortly after, concerns are raised by Ofsted about the unlawful restraint of children there.

In July, in response to the Medomsley report, the Chief Social Worker for England publishes a rapid review of safeguarding in the children and young people's secure estate. She reports that too much time and public money is spent repeating the same messages of systemic failure, and that without adequate investment and support for radical reform and its implementation, even the best ideas will founder. She urges the government to "make change happen".

Howard League for Penal Reform

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