

Review

In the Care of the State? Child Deaths in Penal Custody in England and Wales, Barry Goldson and Deborah Coles, Inquest, London, 2005

Joseph Scholes was serving only the ninth day of a two year sentence when he made a noose from a bed sheet and hung himself from the window bars in his cell. He wrote in a note to his parents 'I love you mum and dad. I'm sorry I just can't cope. Don't be sad. It's no one's fault. I just can't go on ... I tried telling them but they just don't fucking listen' (Goldson & Coles 2005:63-64). Joseph was imprisoned for participating in a street robbery with a group of other young people – his actions involved no violence. He was acutely vulnerable and had a history of repeated and severe sexual assault and suicidal and self-harming behaviour (ibid:63). When he died Joseph Scholes was 16 years old. His story is one of the case studies detailed within *In the Care of the State*.

In this highly accessible text, Goldson and Coles present the first comprehensive analysis of child deaths in custody in England and Wales. Between 1990 and May 2005 there were 28 child deaths in custody aged 10-17 (ibid:28). It is the central purpose of this work to interrogate the institutional conditions and cultures that gave rise to these deaths and to critique the inadequacies of official investigations and inquests that follow in the aftermath of death. *In the Care of the State* is intended as an interventionist text designed to facilitate comprehensive systemic reform and change. While the content focuses on England and Wales, the experience and themes are applicable to other western democratic states such as the US, Australia and Western Europe which also face a range of crises exacerbated by an ever-expanding penal estate. The text provides for a broad readership – academics, students and the general public - while also serving as a vital resource for legal practitioners, prisoner advocates and activists, prisoner families and friends.

In the Care of the State firmly situates itself among seminal critical texts that confront official responses not only to controversial deaths in custody but discreditable episodes and legitimacy crises generally (Carlen & Burton 1979; Scraton & Chadwick 1987; Cohen 2001; Scraton & Moore 2005). The text is also informed by the important contributions and interventions by grass roots organisations such as INQUEST, committed to raising public awareness about deaths in custody as well as providing invaluable support to families who have lost loved ones inside. While the text is brief (133 pages including References and Index) it speaks volumes about the consequences of the 'new punitiveness', a phenomenon underpinned by simplistic populist and retributive law and order campaigns and initiatives, greater use of imprisonment and an expanding prisoner population (Goldson 2002; Pratt et al 2005). Goldson and Coles report the staggering fact that England and Wales has witnessed a greater use of penal custody for children than most other industrialised democratic countries in the world (ibid:2). This has resulted in an overcrowded, overstretched system characterised by dysfunction, neglect and failure. The authors argue it is within this context that the high number of child deaths and the circumstances surrounding them must be understood.

In confronting the issue of child deaths, Goldson and Coles also take stock of the tensions and paradoxes presented by extensive reformative initiatives by custodial authorities to address the problem. While warning against consequences stemming from the 'humanisation' of penal custody for children, they argue that the many reform initiatives will be irrelevant and ineffective if the system remains, at core, retributive in its approach. Ultimately Goldson and Coles state the need to move away from imprisonment as a solution to what are essentially social, not criminal justice, matters.

In situating their analysis from 'below' Goldson and Coles stand alongside the families and children most affected by the system they interrogate. Ultimately they compel the reader to stand in the shoes of the children who have died and confront their personal experiences that led to their imprisonment and death. They argue it is one thing to calculate and report the quantifiable statistics of deaths in custody, but to measure the trauma, pain and experiences around each death presents profound challenges. They suggest:

... perhaps imagination is our most incisive and appreciative research method. A deeper understanding might be achieved, therefore, by reflecting on what passes through a child's mind in prison; what drives a child to deliberately self-harm and, ultimately, how desperate a child must become before they are left feeling that death is preferable to life (ibid:44).

Throughout the text Goldson and Coles avoid using sanitising and criminalising terminology such as 'juveniles' and 'young offenders' and refer to individuals like Joseph Scholes as they are: 'children'. This has a powerful effect and, as a consequence, the reader is unable to distance themselves from the pain and suffering experienced by an acutely vulnerable group burdened with 'multiple disadvantage, personal trauma, fear, loneliness, anxiety, uncertainty, injustice, powerlessness, bullying, abuse and violation' (ibid:44). The authors confront the reader with material that is almost too distressing to bear. However, the humanity and compassion borne through attempts to understand and even feel children's experiences of life and death in custody are the key strengths of this work. Such qualities can only inspire a sense of urgency for change that might, hopefully, in some small way, make a difference for other children like Joseph Scholes in the future.

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