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To cite this article: Claire Paterson-Young (2022): “We are Still Running around with the Same Rules, but We are Not the Same We Were 20 Years Ago” – Exploring the Perceptions of Youth Justice Professionals on Secure Training Centres, Residential Treatment for Children & Youth, DOI: [10.1080/0886571X.2022.2038340](https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2022.2038340)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/0886571X.2022.2038340>



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Published online: 17 Feb 2022.



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# “We are Still Running around with the Same Rules, but We are Not the Same We Were 20 Years Ago” – Exploring the Perceptions of Youth Justice Professionals on Secure Training Centres

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## ABSTRACT

Debates on the incarceration of children in residential settings has been ongoing for decades, with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child and academic literature acknowledging that custody is *not* in the best interest of the child. In England, the problems associated with placing children in custody have been documented since 1999 and, nearly twenty years later, a BBC Panorama exposed the abuse of children at the hands of staff in the same Secure Training Center. This paper examines staff and other professional perceptions as to the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers, youth custodial environments, through thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews with staff members employed in Secure Training Centers and other professionals in the youth justice sector (i.e. Social Workers, Youth Offending Officers and Managers). It seeks to identify perceptions on the purpose and challenge of Secure Training Centers in supporting children who have experienced adverse circumstances resulting in trauma. It illustrates the need for embedding trauma-informed “Child First” approaches in Secure Training Centers, and youth custodial environments globally, to enable staff to adequately support children to build empowering relationships.

## KEYWORDS

Custody; support; interventions; uncertainty; children; youth justice

## Practice Implications

- Informing best practice in supporting children in Secure Training Centres
- Identifying the challenges in delivering support to children in secure environments
- Informing trauma-informed ‘Child First’ approaches to supporting children

## Introduction

The United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child and academic literature (Alston, 1994; Anglin, 2004; Goldstein et al., 1973) acknowledge that custody is *not* in the best interest of the child. Children in custody, and

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other residential settings, have experienced a range of adverse circumstances that result in trauma, risk-taking behavior and victimization (Agnew, 2002). Placing children in custody only serves to mirror adverse experiences – creating challenges for staff. Secure Training Centers are custodial environments for children (aged 12 to 17 years-old) in England and Wales (Secure Training Centre, 1998). Discussions regarding the purpose of Secure Training Centers were questioned following the Social Services Inspectorate (1999) on Medway Secure Training Center; however, despite attempts to improve Secure Training Centers, a BBC Panorama (current affairs and investigations) television programme in January 2016 exposed the abuse of children at the hands of staff in Medway Secure Training Centers (BBC News, 2016). The problems with Secure Training Centers received further attention in the Youth Justice System (Taylor, 2016). The recent issues highlighted by the BBC Panorama programme (BBC News, 2016) and the youth justice review (Taylor, 2016) are in direct contrast to approaches that supposedly situate “Child First” (see, Case & Haines, 2014; Drakeford, 2010; Haines & Drakeford, 1998) within the youth justice system. This approach promotes children’s involvement through the legitimate engagement of children in the design of interventions. It enables the development of child-friendly and child-appropriate approaches to youth justice that tackle the risk-based approaches that hinder outcomes (Case & Haines, 2014). This paper draws on the accounts from staff members working in Secure Training Centers and other professionals from the youth justice sector (i.e. Youth Offending Officers, Youth Offending Managers, Qualified Social Workers, Police, and Senior Youth Justice Practitioners) to examine perceptions of the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers in England and Wales. It seeks to identify perceptions on the purpose, function and challenges for Secure Training Centers in supporting children who have experiences adverse circumstances resulting in trauma.

## **The Backdrop: Context and Critical Issues in Youth Justice**

### ***Children in Custody***

Scholars have repeatedly highlighted the ambiguities of youth custody, with a remit that lies somewhere between punishment, protection, and treatment (Henriksen & Schliehe, 2020, 2020). Children exhibiting behavior in conflict with the law are amongst the most vulnerable in society (McAra & McVie, 2010), having problems with education, health, and associations with criminal families or friends in the community that impact on the outcomes for such children (Paterson-Young et al., 2019). The experiences of children in conflict mirror those of children in care, with higher rates of mental health difficulties than the general population (three quarters of whom are in

residential homes; Sinclair et al., 2019). This is heightened for children in residential settings, with research in the United Kingdom showing the detrimental impact it has their lives (Paterson-Young et al., 2019). This is supported by international research showing that children in residential settings experience higher rates of trauma (50–70%; Bettmann et al., 2011; Jaycox et al., 2004; Zelechowski et al., 2013).

The average occupancy rate for children in the Secure Training Center was 80 children (per month) at the time of the research (Paterson-Young, 2018), with approximated 68% of children aged 15 to 16 years-old. Research examining the impact of Secure Training Centers on children found several factors experienced by children on entering custody, specifically substance misuse (87.5%), domestic abuse (51%), bereavement (25%) and/or experiences in the care system (43%; Paterson-Young, 2021; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Further data on the overall population of children in custody (under 18 years-old) is available from the Youth Justice Board (YJB; 2021). The challenges facing children on entering custody (including experiences with domestic violence) illustrates the vulnerabilities of children and the importance of creating a “Child-First” system that acknowledges trauma-informed approaches (Wright & Liddle, 2014). Trauma-informed approaches acknowledge that behavior is impacted by risk factors (i.e. factors that increase the likelihood of involvement in crime and/or protective factors (i.e. factors that reduce the likelihood of involvement in crime; Serin et al., 2016).

In England, the number of children sentenced to immediate custody had decreased from 14% to 12% over the period 2017–2018 (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2020). Reductions in custodial sentences follow on from previous increases, with the number of children sentenced to immediate custody greater in 2018–2019 than in the year ending March 2009 (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2020). The average custodial sentence has increased from 11.4 to 17.7 months since 2008–2009 (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2020) and in 2018/2019 the average monthly population of children in custody was 859. The three distinct custodial environments for children in England, are: Secure Children’s Homes, designed to accommodate children aged 10 to 17 years-old; Secure Training Centers, designed to accommodate children aged 12 to 17 years-old; and Young Offender Institutions, designed to accommodate children/young adults aged 15 to 21 years-old. A new category of custodial environments, Secure Schools<sup>1</sup> (recommended by Taylor in 2016), was scheduled to start operation in 2019 (HM Government, 2018). Overall, Secure Training Centers can each accommodate 50 to 80 children, with information from April 2018 and March 2019 showing the average number of children varied from 938 in April 2018 to 832 in March 2019 (Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), 2019).

## Secure Training Centers

Concerns over the management of children involved in criminal activity resulted in increased pressure for control and security, leading to the introduction of Secure Training Centers (Hagell & Hazel, 2001). Secure Training Centers were initially introduced to accommodate 12 to 14 year-old children receiving Secure Training Orders (STO) (replaced by Detention Training Orders (DTO)), but welfare and safety concerns led to an increase in the age of children accommodated in custody (12 to 17 years-old). These concerns arose in 2000 following the tragic deaths of Kevin Henson and David Dennis (both aged 17 years-old) whilst in custody (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2014). Secure Training Centers cost approximately £160,000 per person per annum (Parliament, 2016), lower than Secure Children's Homes (£210,000 per person) and higher than Young Offender Institutions (£76,000 per person; Parliament, 2016).

In 2021, England and Wales had two Secure Training Centers in operation: Rainsbrook (operational since 1999) and Oakhill (operational since 2004). Secure Training Centers are managed by private companies (MTC Novo and G4S, respectively). In 2020, Medway Secure Training Center was closed and is expected to be replaced by a Secure School (HM Government, 2018). Secure Training Centers are guided by the Secure Training Centre (1998), with a statement of purpose outlining the centers aims as being: “(a) to accommodate trainees in a safe environment within secure conditions; and (b) to help trainees prepare for their return to the outside community.” Children receive 25 hours of education (9am – 12pm and 2pm – 4pm) per week including core education (i.e. English and Math) and vocational education (i.e. Mechanics and Hair Dressing). Other support offered to children include Psychology, Health Care and Substance Misuse (Paterson-Young, 2018). These were to be achieved by ensuring a high standard of education and training, designing programmes to address offending behavior, ensure links with the community, and collaborate with community services to support children on release.

Identifying the perceptions on the purpose and function of Secure Training Centers in supporting children who have experienced adverse circumstances resulting in trauma is the primary focus of this study. However, acknowledging the wider staff experiences in residential settings contributes to our understanding on the challenges in such environments. Staff members working in Secure Training Centers experience challenges (i.e. violence), contributing to a stressful and challenging environment (Ofsted, 2018; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Staff working in these environments are reliant on robust and effective community and/or support (Carpenter et al., 2012; McNamara, 2010). Staff in residential settings often report negative experiences; leading to emotional exhaustion, limited personal accomplishment, reduced commitment to the role and

negative attitudes toward residents (Carpenter et al., 2012; McNamara, 2010). Fostering a supportive environment, with robust communication and support helps to reduce burnout (Maslach, 1993) and vicarious trauma – the individual’s psychological, physical and emotional well-being through engagement with material depicting trauma (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995).

### ***Critical Issues (Children in Custody)***

Critical issues in custody for children were noted in the Social Services Inspectorate (1999) on Medway Secure Training Center and, nearly twenty years later, a BBC Panorama (BBC News, 2016) programme exposing the abuse of children in the same center. Medway Secure Training Center received significant criticism following the alleged physical and emotional abuse of children by staff in January 2016 (BBC News, 2016). The Government responded to abuse allegations by appointing an Independent Improvement Board that recommended changes in policy and practice (Holden et al., 2016). The Independent Improvement Board’s primary recommendation was for the introduction of clear guidance on the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers, with renewed focus on education and rehabilitation within an environment that promotes the safety and welfare of children (Holden et al., 2016). Children’s experience with violence in secure settings is nothing new, with research in the Netherlands showing that residential settings promote violence (Euser et al., 2014).

Charlie Taylor<sup>2</sup> was appointed to review the youth justice system, following the Ministry of Justice plans to transform youth custody (Taylor, 2016). The review discussed the management of children involved in the criminal justice system, explaining the reasons children should be managed separately from adults (Taylor, 2016). It illustrated the need for support that acknowledges the particular complexities and challenges facing vulnerable children (Taylor, 2016). This review resulted in recommendations to redesign the youth justice system, with an emphasis on custodial accommodation, as a last resort, for children in small secure schools with a renewed focus on education (Taylor, 2016). These recommendations are reflected in research on the benefits of developing positive and supportive relationships in custodial environments that place emphasis on children needs (Andersson & Johansson, 2008; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Since this review, the government has released proposals to close Medway Secure Training Center entirely and replace it with a Secure School (HM Government, 2018). Replacing Medway Secure Training Center, a site underpinned by notions of punishment and control, with a Secure School raises questions about the very implementation of the “Child First” approach (Case & Haines, 2014, 2020; Drakeford, 2010; Haines & Drakeford, 1998).

The issues highlighted by the BBC Panorama programme (BBC News, 2016) and the youth justice review (Taylor, 2016) are in direct contrast to the approaches situating “Child First” in the youth justice system. This approach promotes children’s involvement through the legitimate engagement of children in the design of interventions. This enables the development of child-friendly and child-appropriate approaches to youth justice that tackle the risk-based approaches that hinder outcomes (Case & Haines, 2014). Recent standards set out a child first outcome-focused approach, with the strengths and capabilities of children at the center of support (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2019). Support for children, from this perspective, should be future-focused with supportive relationships at its core (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2019); it requires services and interventions that empower children while minimizing the stigma created by involvement in the criminal justice system. Establishing a Child First approach within custodial environments requires clear guidance as to the purpose and practice. Furthermore, it requires acknowledgment of trauma-informed practices which acknowledge that behavior is impacted by risk factors (i.e. factors that increase the likelihood of involvement in crime and/or protective factors (i.e. factors that reduce the likelihood of involvement in crime; Serin et al., 2016). This approach focuses on understanding trauma, recognizing the impact of trauma, and designing appropriate support (Wright & Liddle, 2014). Trauma-informed practices positioned within a “Child First” approach allows for the development of appropriate support for children that acknowledges their vulnerabilities.

## **Methodology**

The research builds on research, with children and staff in Secure Training Centers, on “how social impact measurement, as a form of organisational performance management can enhance outcomes for children in custody” (Authors Own, 2018). This research addressed children and staff views on the outcomes for children accommodated in a Secure Training Centers, however, it only partially addressed staff perceptions of the purpose of Secure Training Centers within a “Child First” approach. This paper expands on this to provide an in-depth discussion on how staff and other professionals perceive the support available for children in Secure Training Centers. It draws on semi-structured interviews, collected between 2016 and 2018, with staff in a Secure Training Center and other professionals in youth justice.

## **Ethics**

Managing ethical issues was an integral part of the research, especially within a secure custodial environment for children. An ethics application was reviewed by a representative of the Youth Justice Board and the Head of Safeguarding,

positioned within the Secure Training Center. The reviewed application was submitted and approved by the University Research Ethics Committee [REC 2016 60.12]. The core issues addressed in the ethics applications were confidentiality and anonymity; voluntary informed consent from children and guardians; data protection and storage; and the safeguarding of participants. Participants in interviews were randomly assigned pseudonyms to protect confidentiality and anonymity. Participants' safety was paramount, with safeguarding training and an updated Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) completed. Interviews were determined by participants, with interviews conducted with staff members in Secure Training Centers or external locations (for example, privately booked rooms in community centers), whilst interviews with other professionals in the youth justice sector were conducted in privately booked rooms in offices and/or community centers. Formal ethical procedures are critical in completing research, however, research in confinement settings require an understanding of the characteristics of children in such settings and the demanding dynamics of such environments (Gomes & Duarte, 2020).

### Participants

Staff members participating in semi-structured interviews were recruited via e-mail invitations (sent internally to staff members) and posters in staff areas (for example, kitchens and break areas). 21 staff members were scheduled to participate in the research; however, staff turnover and sickness resulted in only 15 staff members ultimately participating. Interview participants were mostly female ( $n = 11$ ), with the remaining participants male ( $n = 4$ ). Staff qualifications ranged from secondary education (i.e. basic secondary school education) to university education (i.e. undergraduate or postgraduate degree), with roles varying from Secure Care Officers, Resettlement, Education, Management, to Intervention staff. The service length of participants varied from 1 month to over 8 years. Table 1 provides a breakdown of the sample's demographics.

**Table 1.** Characteristics of staff members participating in interviews ( $N = 15$ ).

Variable		Number
Sex	Male	4
	Female	11
Length of Service	<6 months	4
	6–11 months	2
	12–23 months	3
	2–8 years	2
	> 8 Years	4
Role	Resettlement	4
	Intervention	3
	Secure Care Officer	4
	Management	1
	Education	3



**Table 2.** Characteristics of professional participating in interviews ( $N = 15$ ).

Variable		Number
Sex	Male	9
	Female	6
Sector	Youth Offending Manager	7
	Youth Offending Officer	2
	Social Worker	2
	CEO Charity	1
	Police	3
Experience in Youth Justice Sector	1–5 years	4
	5–10 years	5
	>10 years	5

Other professionals in the youth justice sector were included in the research to collect views on the perception of Secure Training Centers beyond staff in the Secure Training Center. Other professionals were recruited from networks in the youth justice sector, with 15 professionals participating in interviews across a three-month period. There were six female participants and nine male participants; the majority were from the Youth Offending Service ( $n = 9$ ), with two Youth Offending Officers and seven Youth Offending Managers (the remaining participants were Qualified Social Workers, Police, and Charity CEO [Senior Youth Justice Practitioner]). Experience in the Youth Justice sector varied, with participants working in the sector from one year to 25 years. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the sample's demographics.

### **Procedure**

Semi-structured interviews, lasting between 30 and 90 minutes, were conducted with staff members in a Secure Training Center ( $n = 15$ ) and other professionals in the youth justice sector (i.e., youth offending teams, social care, youth justice charities and police) ( $n = 15$ ). A convenience sampling technique was adopted to promote voluntary responses from participants, however, it can lead to subjectivity and human bias with individuals only participating as the research invokes strong opinions (Bryman, 2012). Issues with bias were addressed through a transparent and rigorous process in which data from interviews were cross-checked with findings from quantitative research (Paterson-Young, 2018). Interview schedules were designed to investigate the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers in England based on semi-structured interviews with staff in Secure Training Centers and other professionals in the youth justice sector. Questions in the interview schedule were developed from a literature review on the critical issues with children in custody, including the “Child First” approach that offers a progressive approach to supporting children in the criminal justice system (Case & Haines, 2014, 2020; Drakeford, 2010; Haines & Drakeford, 1998).

Interview schedules included questions for staff on “Do you feel the current principles and values are appropriate at the centre?,” “Do you think the centre supports children to desist from offending?,” “What are views of the support/interventions offered to children at the Centre?,” and “Do you think the Centre supports children to learn useful skills?” and “What are your relationships like with staff in the Secure Training Centres?.” Interview schedules for other professionals included questions on “What are your views on the use of custody for children?,” “What do you know about Secure Training Centres?,” “What services do you think are offered in Secure Training Centres?,” “What services do you feel should be offered to children involved in offending?,” and “What do you feel are the important factors in supporting children to desist?” Interviews, lasting between 30 and 90 minutes, were conducted in the Secure Training Center environment with staff (for example, youth offending team officers) in a professional setting and were voice-recorded (with additional notes scribed) and transcribed by the researcher.

## **Analysis**

Perceptions of staff and other professionals, as collected through semi-structured interviews, were analyzed to establish: (i) professionals’ perceptions of the incarceration of children in Secure Training Centers; (ii) the service offered to children in Secure Training Centers; and (iii) the effectiveness of Secure Training Centers in improving children’s outcomes. Interviews were organized in NVivo 11.4.0 and analyzed using a six-phase thematic analysis approach – “data familiarisation”; “data coding”; “theme development”; “theme review and development”; “theme refinement and naming,” and “reporting” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020; Clarke & Braun, 2017). “Data familiarisation,” a detailed review of interview transcripts, was essential for “data coding.” “Data coding” involved identification of key codes (assigned shorthand labels) that were interrogated to identify categories (“theme development”). The codes and categories were reviewed and developed in the “theme review and development” stage which allowed for the creation of core themes: “uncertainty regarding the purpose of Secure Training Centres,” “delivering the right support to children,” and “limited resources and interventions” (Table 3).

## **Results**

### ***Uncertainty regarding the Purpose of Secure Training Centers***

Secure Training Centers were designed for the purpose of “*accommodating trainees in a safe environment within secure conditions; and helping trainees prepare for their return to the outside community*” (Secure Training Centre,



**Table 3.** Overview of themes ( $N = 30$ ).

Theme	Sub-themes	Example
Uncertainty regarding the purpose of Secure Training Centers	Lost vision	"It's absolutely lost its way and vision . . . The party line that we were given was that the Secure Training Centre was set up by the Government to provide a short sharp shock to persistent offenders who were stealing cars and burglary and that kind of level . . ." (Jane – Staff Member)
	Outdated values	"I think some of the values need to change sometimes, especially with the older boys we have now. Seven years ago, we mostly had 13- and 14-year-olds, but now we have 16-, 17-, and 15-year-olds and I think we need to change with the times . . ." (Ella – Staff Member)
Delivering the right support to children	Inappropriate values and principles	"I mean the values and principles are clearly displayed around the centre and we receive information on our training, but I don't think they work in the centre . . ." (Val – Staff Member)
	Need for support and encouragement	"Children in these places really need support and encouragement. I worked with a young man, he was 16 at the time he was sent to the centre, and he really needed a supportive environment . . ." (Rob – Other Professional)
	Common (mis) understanding	" . . . I would describe it as a holiday camp . . . you know what, we are putting young people in there as a way of punishment . . ." (Mike – Other Professional)
	Promoting desistance	"In terms of his offending, have we stopped his offending behaviour? Probably not, but I don't know if that's our fault or the length of time he was here" (Jane – Staff Member)
	Desire to change	"Sometimes the young people don't actually want to change . . ." (Ella – Staff Member)
Limited resources and interventions	Understand the consequences	"So, you, put all the interventions into the world, and they could reap the most amounts from this centre, but if this stuff isn't continued in the community, then they haven't got a hope in hell . . ." (Pat – Staff Member)
	Inconsistency	" . . . my problem with secure training centre is that some are really good, if you like, but since a lot of them have been taking over by private companies . . ." (Felicity – Other Professional)
	Partnership working	"I have got a young person currently in an Secure Training Centre and I am working quite closely with the case manager there . . . you don't always find out anything about the Secure Training Centre." (Liz – Other Professional)
	Balancing resources	"There aren't enough staff offering psychology interventions and I don't think there is enough time . . . Yes, education is a priority but how can a young person that doesn't understand themselves learn anything else." (Karen – Staff Member)
	Prioritizing support	" . . . we are really tight on resources for psychology . . . I think if we had more people on the team then there would be a lot more that we could do with the young people . . ." (Sam – Staff Member)
	The right resources	"I don't think our service is big enough for the young people that require it, in short . . ." (Naz – Staff Member)
	Desistance work	"I think we could do more around offending work . . ." (John – Staff Member).

1998). Originally, Secure Training Centers were established to accommodate children aged 12 to 14 years-old on Secure Training Orders and, whilst, the age of children accommodated has increased (12 to 17 years-old), the purpose has remained largely static despite (Pitts, 2001; Paterson-Young, 2018; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Staff members discussing the purpose of Secure Training Centers argue that it has lost clarity:

*“It’s absolutely lost its way and vision . . . The party line that we were given was that the Secure Training Centre was set up by the Government to provide a short sharp shock to persistent offenders who were stealing cars and that kind of level. And it . . . rare that we would have a 15-year-old in custody as they went, automatically, to a Young Offenders. Whereas obviously now we have kids just short of 18. And . . . the purpose and function has not changed to reflect that change” (Jane - Staff Member)*

Jane discussed issues about the purpose and function of Secure Training Centers, reflecting on the ages of children accommodated in them. The mention of “short sharp shock” and “persistent offenders” mirror the rhetoric that led to the creation of Secure Training Centers. This comment was reiterated by Ella.

*“I think some of the values need to change sometimes, especially with the older boys we have now. Seven years ago, we mostly had 13- and 14-year-olds, but now we have 16-, 17-, and 15-year-olds and I think we need to change with the times. I think they are still there, but it can be a bit of a grey area and we should change with the cliental of young people we have here now” (Ella – Staff Member)*

Concerningly, staff appear to suggest that the cohort of children in Secure Training Centers are *not* children. These perceptions were most common amongst staff employed at Secure Training Centers as the cohort changed. Another staff members furthered this point:

*“I mean the values and principles are clearly displayed around the centre and we receive information on our training, but I don’t think they work in the centre . . . the kids we used to have here were much younger, like 13 and 14. Most of the kids, if you can call them kids that we have here now, are like 16 and 17. The older kids are intense because they are set in their ways and don’t want to listen to the rules . . . I think the need to change the values and principles to reflect our current kids” (Val – Staff Member)*

Another member of staff said the Secure Training Center rules are appropriate for the Center, reflecting on the rules established in 1998. Pat believes that the environments should be specific to the age groups, acknowledging the differences between children aged 12 and children aged 16:

*“They are appropriate for the centre but not for our clientele, in terms of the young people. Things have moved [since 1998] forward but unfortunately [the principles and rules] haven’t moved with it and changed enough to deal with the young people we*

*are dealing with now . . . We should be working with the younger age groups here and should set up another centre or something for the older age groups” (Pat – Staff Member)*

Staff members perceive Secure Training Centers to be inappropriate for the children currently accommodated, arguing that the Centers are for “younger age groups” (an argument that does not align with the “Child First” approach).

Other professionals in the youth justice sector argue the opposite, claiming that the children in Secure Training Centers require a supportive and caring environment:

*“Children in these places really need support and encouragement. I worked with a young man . . . he came from a difficult family, and they initially wanted to send him to a YOI, but we argued that he needed a more supportive and caring environment – you know. It is awful to think of any child in a prison. People really forget that at 15 and 16 you are still a child. I would have been terrified at that age.” (Rob – Other Professional)*

Perceptions of the purpose of Secure Training Centers were often associated with education, with Dave reflecting on the challenges of providing education provisions that meet the needs of all children.

*“ . . . my understanding is that they provide education and rehabilitation for young people in a caring environment . . . if you visit . . . you find that they are very similar to prisons . . . I think I expected them to provide a range of education – mainstream, vocational, innovative education . . . some young people may have really high abilities and require A-levels, but others may have struggled or have been excluded from a young age which will mean they need different education.” (Dave – Other Professional)*

Another youth justice professional said that the services in Secure Training Centers are unknown, which makes it difficult to identify appropriate accommodations for children:

*“We have had a few of our lads sent to secure training centres so I know a bit about secure training centres. Although, I think the actual services offered by these places are unclear . . . I don’t think the education is effective . . . they offer basic education for all young people, but they don’t tailor the education to abilities.” (Sophie – Other Professional)*

Another participant said that Secure Training Centers are like holiday camps:

*“ . . . I would describe it as a holiday camp . . . we are putting young people in there as a way of punishment and I . . . I agree and disagree with that . . . I think, in there, there could be a lot more development for young people.” (Mike – Other Professional)*

The perceptions of staff in the Secure Training Center do not align with the “Child First” approach, with views that children were *not* actually children, and the Secure Training Center should only accommodate very young children. This is in contrast with other professionals who argue that they should be treated more like younger children.

## **Delivering the Right Support to Children**

Helping children transition to the community and desist from offending was a guiding principle of Secure Training Centers, in the sense of “... *helping trainees prepare for their return to the outside community ... establishing a programme designed to tackle the offending behaviour of each trainee and to assist in his development*” being a core purpose of Secure Training Centers (Secure Training Centre, 1998). Staff members discussed their views on the effectiveness of Secure Training Centers in terms of helping children return to the outside community and desist from offending:

*“In terms of his offending, have we stopped his offending behaviour? Probably not, but I don’t know if that’s our fault or the length of time he was here” (Jane – Staff Member)*

This raises question over the purpose of Secure Training Centers and whether children receive the right support. Another staff members discussed children’s desire to change, reflecting on the fact that some children do *not* want to change:

*“Sometimes the young people don’t actually want to change. We try as much as possible, and I have worked with young people on a one-to-one basis and at the end they will say “I’m really sorry K, thanks for all your help, but I’m going back to what I know and where I have come from”. As much as you have those conversations and as much as you do the consequences of behaviour work, you can’t change everyone. I sort of learnt that after I started” (Ella - Staff Member)*

The myth that children involved in criminal activity do not *want* to change is evident from staff perceptions.

One staff member reflected on the fact children return to the same environment and that the support offered in Secure Training Centers is ineffective at solving this problem. This point was furthered by Pat who claimed that, regardless of support offered in Secure Training Centers, children have limited support when returning to the community:

*“Ok, you can come here and put all the interventions into the world, and they could reap the most amounts from this centre, but if this stuff isn’t continued in the community, then they haven’t got a hope in hell. Because if they come here, for example, on a 12 [and] do six, they spend six months getting all this support and stuff then go out and they don’t have anything, and the community aren’t putting that in (social services, YOT services), then literally all the work that has been done can potentially be undone in half the amount of time. And then in a few months they are committing” (Pat – Staff Member)*

Staff members were skeptical about the Secure Training Center’s effectiveness at helping children to stop offending. They cited the challenges to maintaining a crime-free life on return to the community, specifically for children returning to the same environments. This view was mirrored by other youth justice professionals:

*“... my problem with secure training centre is that some are really good, if you like, but since a lot of them have been taking over by private companies... And one particular case I have in a secure training centre... what happens when they do something that is not right they get sanctioned... these sanctions are not followed through so when other staff come in, if a young person is put down to basic meaning they can't have a telly, the next lot of staff with come in and give them a telly.” (Felicity – Other Professional)*

The support available for children leaving Secure Training Centers was criticized, with comments from Liz reiterating the fact that children received limited resettlement support:

*“I have got a young person currently in a Secure Training Centre and I am working quite closely with the case manager... you don't always find out anything about the Secure Training Centre. It's just a given that they go in, get looked at, they get education... and then they come out. And it's almost as if young people come out of Secure Training Centre and take on a massive responsibility when they come out to try... if they are not from a particularly supportive background” (Liz – Other Professional).*

Children in custody experience a wealth of challenges in the community, with children experiencing substance misuse (87.5%), domestic abuse (51%), bereavement (25%) and/or experiences in the care system (43%; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). This illustrates the vulnerabilities facing children entering custody and the need for trauma-informed practices that help children understand trauma and recognize the impact of trauma.

### **Limited Resources and Interventions**

Secure Training Centers have a core objective to “... help trainees prepare for their return to the outside community” through the delivery of interventions (Secure Training Centre, 1998). The resources available for delivering interventions in custody were discussed by staff members:

*“There aren't enough staff offering psychology interventions and I don't think there is enough time. Because contractually, (children) have to do 25 hours of education. Yes, education is a priority but how can a young person that doesn't understand themselves learn anything else. I find it really difficult when some of these young people have witnessed so much, intervention is way more important than sitting them in a classroom colouring for an hour” (Karen – Staff Member)*

Karen reflected on the limited resources available for delivering interventions, specifically for the provision of essential psychology and substance misuse services. This reflection was reiterated by Sam:

*“... we are really tight on resources for psychology... if we had more people on the team then there would be a lot more that we could do with the young people. I mean I had a young person that was getting psychology support and it wasn't frequent*

*support. And that's one thing, because we have to cut things and we have young people that are on shorter sentences, we have to prioritise them, and he missed out"* (Sam – Staff Member)

Limited resources create a stressful environment for staff, increasing incidents of vicarious trauma (Pearlman & Saakvitne, 1995) and burnout (Maslach, 1993). Another staff member, Naz, discussed the fact that children were not receiving essential services as a result of staffing issues:

*"I don't think our service is big enough for the young people that require it . . . I mean we have 80 young people, and we have 1.2 psychologists or assistant psychologists. And they are expected to do everything for everyone, and their waiting list (is long). So unfortunately for a lot of our young people who require interventions, our most complex kids that require the most in-depth intervention can't get it"* (Naz – Staff Member)

The concerns raised by Naz were supported by Val who reflected on the lack of appropriate interventions that encourage children to stop offending:

*"No, we definitely don't. We don't provide [the right] intervention so the kids just leave with the same attitude. The only time we make a difference is with the kids that have only offended once, but honestly, I don't think those kids would offend again. For the ones that have [committed] multiple offences, they just laugh it off"* (Val – Staff Member)

Another issue highlighted by staff members relates to the priorities of Secure Training Centers and the need for flexibility over delivering services and/or support:

*"This is a profit-making organisation and I mean things like (for years and years) it's always been that the kids must do 25 hours' education. We have had numerous criticisms from the YJB because we can't take kids out of school to do psychology work. We have one full-time psychologist (who looks about 12) and a part-time psychologist trying to see 80, potentially, I mean they all should be seen, really vulnerable kids and really damaged kids outside the school day. It's physically impossible"* (Jane – Staff Member)

The rigid adherence to education schedules impacts on access to psychology and/or psychiatry services that are essential for children that have experienced trauma. Another point discussed by staff was the need for offending-focused interventions:

*"I think we could do more around offending work. I will probably say that about most things, because if we can't, we will never have it 100 per cent correct. There is always stuff we can learn, stuff we can do and external provisions we can pull in. I think the level of intervention around that could be higher"* (John – Staff Member).

The view that children require offending-focused interventions does not align with the "Child First" approach. This raises an interesting question as to why this staff member is recommending interventions that are focused on offending behavior.



Children in Secure Training Centers are a vulnerable group, requiring a partnership approach to transition from custody (Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Other professionals' views of the services available in Secure Training Centers vary:

*“... I personally do not agree with incarcerating young people ... [Secure Training Centres] offer a range of services dependent upon the behaviours that are being displayed by an individual from mainstream education ... right the way through to psychology ... ”*  
(Sam – Other Professional)

John discussed the need for wraparound support for children in Secure Training Centers, while reflecting on the fact that custodial environments should be a last resort:

*“Other things I would expect – psychology interventions, mental health support and therapeutic interventions. For young people in custody, I think a big issue surrounds mental health and therapeutic or holistic approaches. But, from experience of working with young people that have been in secure, I don't think that actually happens much. Especially with short sentences and that kind of thing.”* (John – Other Professional)

This was reiterated by Dan, who commented on the need for additional support and resources in Secure Training Centers:

*“I know they also offer interventions (substance misuse and psychology) but there needs to be increased resources to really make them effective. Plus, with young people receiving short sentences, there is really limited time to support them to the right level.”* (Dan – Other Professional)

Staff and other professionals comment on the need for wraparound services that address the *real* needs of children in custody.

## **Discussion**

Secure Training Centers were originally designed to accommodate 12- to 14 year-olds receiving STO (or DTO) but now accommodate older children (aged 12- to 17 years-old). Changes were introduced following the deaths of Kevin Henson (17 year-old) and David Dennis (17 year-old; Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2014). Welfare and safety concerns have arisen as a result of Secure Training Centers changing to accommodate children aged 12- to 17 years-old, with provision for accommodation of vulnerable children extending to 18 years-old in custody (Pitts, 2001). The purpose of Secure Training Centers has remained largely static over the years, with changes in the cohort of children accommodated not being adequately reflected in the *de facto* operation of Secure Training Centers. Staff members participating in the research reflect on the changing cohort of children, with participants explicitly stating that the rules have not changed to acknowledge the children accommodated in Secure Training Centers. The static nature of Secure Training

Centers created precarity for staff and other professionals with regard to their purpose, which impacts on the delivery of services. This precarity exists despite the Independent Improvement Board's recommending the introduction of clear guidance on the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers (Holden et al., 2016).

Concerningly, staff appeared to suggest that the cohort of children in Secure Training Centers are *not* children but rather “persistent offenders” who require a risk-based approach. This risk-based approach is evident from the practice of physical restraint in Secure Training Centers (Paterson-Young, 2021). Secure Training Centers routinely use Minimizing and Managing Physical Restraint (MMPR) techniques (HM Inspector of Prisons, 2015) with children in custody. In 2020, the Youth Justice Board (YJB; 2020) reported that 7,200 children and young people experienced restraint in the year ending March 2019, with MMPR techniques in 68% of incidents (Youth Justice Board (YJB), 2020). This does not align with the “Child First” approach (children should be viewed as children), or the perceptions of other youth justice professionals, and thus clarifying the actual purpose of Secure Training Centers is essential to the delivery of effective and sustainable services (Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Furthermore, children entering custody experience a wealth of challenges which illustrates the need for trauma-informed practices – recognizing the impact of trauma on children. Research shows that staff require targeted support and training to reduce reliance on restraint and develop trauma-informed approaches to dealing with children (Denison et al., 2018). Increasing staff understanding of trauma-informed practices whilst embedding trauma-informed practices throughout the Secure Training System could reduce reliance on restraint. This requires a dual approach to embedding trauma-informed practices, with staff training (bottom-up) complemented by policy and practice (top-down)

Staff members and other youth justice professionals reflect on the need for wraparound support for children. Resource issues mean that access to essential services, such as Psychology and Substance Misuse, are limited for children (Paterson-Young et al., 2019). This reduces the opportunities for children to access services, children who have experienced challenges in the community including substance misuse (87.5%), domestic abuse (51%), bereavement (25%) and/or experiences in the care system (43%; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Another problem raised by staff and other youth justice professionals was associated with the effectiveness of current interventions. Staff members were skeptical about the Secure Training Center's effectiveness in helping to improve the outcomes for children. The recommendation that Secure Training Centers need *more* interventions to address offending behavior was somewhat concerning, illustrating the risk-based approach that has shaped youth justice practice (Case & Haines, 2014). Embedding trauma-informed practices that recognize the experiences of children (i.e. domestic

abuse and/or experience in the care system) enable staff to support children in the awareness, understanding and responsiveness to traumatic experiences.

“Child First” (Case & Haines, 2014; Drakeford, 2010; Haines & Drakeford, 1998) approaches encourage meaningful participation and engagement with children. Without the resources and support for child-focused and/or developmentally geared approaches, staff members are unable to perform their jobs effectively (McNamara, 2010). Staff members noted that inadequate resources for psychology and/or substance misuse services mean that children are not receiving the right support. Provision of resources for children, such as education, psychology, and substance misuse, along with interventions for tackling offending and supporting children to move to prosocial behavior, was mentioned by staff members and other youth justice professionals. Given ambiguities around the remit of youth custodial environments (Henriksen and Prieur, 2019; Henriksen & Refsgaard, 2020), along with limited resources and unclear direction, there are significant challenges to supporting children in Secure Training Centers.

This research is not without limitations, with only a small sample of staff (selected from one Secure Training Center) and other youth justice professionals participating in interviews. The targeted sample for semi-structured interviews with staff members and other professionals in the youth justice sector was 40. Staff member participation was hindered by staff turnover and sickness, whilst other professionals’ participation was hindered by availability. Another limitation is that in-depth information on staff and other professionals qualifications/training were not collected for the research. Further research with staff members and other youth justice professionals would add to our understanding of the challenges in Secure Training Centers and young custodial environments in general.

## Conclusion

Custodial environments are cut off from the outside world, with research showing that custodial sentences have a negative impact on outcomes for children (HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021; Paterson-Young et al., 2019). Secure Training Centers were created to accommodate children in safe environments that offer education and support to address offending behavior. Originally designed to accommodate 12- to 14 year-olds receiving STO (or DTO), Secure Training Centers now accommodate older children (aged 12- to 17 years-old). Changes in the cohort of children accommodated in Secure Training Centers have not been adequately reflected in the daily operation of the Centers. This creates severe challenges for staff working in Secure Training Centers, with the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers currently being unclear – an issue raised by the Independent Improvement Board.

Ambiguity as to the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers creates challenges for staff and other professionals' ability to understand the services offered. Interventions delivered in Secure Training Centers are designed to ensure children have access to the right services in custody, so ambiguity and uncertainty over the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers impacts negatively on children. Uncertainty about the purpose and direction of Secure Training Centers, coupled with limited resources, illustrate a wider problem within youth justice. Secure Training Centers, and youth custodial environments globally, require substantial resources (specifically, substance misuse and psychology services) to ensure staff members have the right skills and support to deliver appropriate services for children. This research supports previous studies (Denison et al., 2018; Paterson-Young, 2021; Wright & Liddle, 2014) that children entering custodial environments experience a wealth of vulnerabilities that would benefit from trauma-informed practices. Trauma-informed practices positioned within a "Child First" approach allows for the development of appropriate support for children that acknowledges their vulnerabilities. Embedding trauma-informed "Child First" approaches in Secure Training Centers, and youth custodial environments globally, would enable staff to adequately support children with a child-focused approach that helps children recognize traumatic experiences and build empowering relationships.

## Notes

1. Child-focused therapeutic environment for young people recommended by Taylor (2016).
2. Charlie Taylor is a former head teacher at a school for children with complex behavioral, expert advisor on behavior for the Department of Education and chair of the Youth Justice Board for England and Wales.

## Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

This work was supported by the University of Northampton [Studentship].

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