

Review

Tackling Crime

Home Office. London: Central Office of Information. October 1989. Pp. 71.

This 71-page brochure has the look and feel of a prospectus. It has a textured cover and is replete with colour photographs in which the subjects appear mostly to be having a good time. The text is sprinkled liberally with coloured boxes for key points.

Tackling Crime is stereotypical. Offenders are represented as ill-clothed and scruffy and appear in black-and-white prints. The police are seen counselling teenagers with "... sensitivity and tact", enjoying a carnival, encircling an unruly football mob, and a handsome white policeman cradling a black child weaves his way smiling through a Caribbean-style market. Mediators and counsellors are women and female prisoners are shown happily at work or chatting to their prison officer friends.

The comments on mentally disturbed (sic) offenders are similarly banal. "The experience of medical officers and other staff is that included amongst these are many who should really be receiving care and support in the community". How does this comment equate with the statement of purpose of the prison service: "Her Majesty's Prison Service serves the public by keeping in custody those committed by the courts"? Are medical officers and other staff saying that many should not have been committed by the courts or is it a reflection of the knee-jerk reaction to any complaint about treatment of mentally disordered offenders in prison that the fault lies with outside services who merely renege on their responsibility to provide care?

There is also mention of the wholly discredited annual survey of inmates who are suitable for detention under the MHA 1983. The meaning of the following sentence remains opaque. "Efforts are being made to calculate the extent to which such people (mentally disturbed offenders) are diverted from the criminal justice system".

It is all a far cry from the words of Dr Colin Herridge who, in referring to the treatment of psychotic offenders at Brixton Prison, wrote in these pages: "I have become increasingly concerned at the treatment of very disturbed and psychotic patients who have to be contained in the so-called 'Special Medical Rooms' (SMRs). These rooms are bare apart from a mattress, extremely dirty and often faeces-smearred as a result of patients' mental state and stifflingly hot in summer and cold in winter. Patients often are naked because of their mental condition and have only a canvas blanket with which to keep warm. They may remain in this condition for some considerable time" (*Psychiatric Bulletin*, April 1989, 13, 200-201).

With regard to suicide, no mention is made of the effects on inmates of the conditions in prison or of the manner in which they are sometimes treated. *Tackling Crime* draws attention to a suicide prevention strategy which emphasises giving "positive support" and providing more time to interview prisoners.

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"As long as there is a shortage of resources, either for research or for action, we have a responsibility to direct our attention, wherever possible, to those parts of the phenomenon that currently appear to create the greatest social problem, or have the greatest likelihood of creating a major problem in the future."

J. A. WALLER