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Catching them young

We do know how to reform young prisoners

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The first part of this remarkable book consists of interviews with young people (and sometimes their parents) who have committed criminal offences. They were selected for interview by local authority youth justice teams and were chosen for the crimes they had committed, rather than for their background or school record. Sarah Curtis interviewed 11 of them. Only one was a girl; five of them were white; six black or of mixed parentage. By chance, this more or less reflects the pattern of young offenders in urban areas.

Curtis is a skilled interviewer of young people, as you might expect from someone who has been a youth court and family court magistrate for more than 20 years. She is also judicious, moderate and cautious in her generalisations; and conspicuously humane in her comments, both on the individuals to whom she spoke and on the various attempts that have been made, by this and the last government, to deal with young offenders. No one can doubt the importance of the issue. The danger is that we may hear so much about it that we do not attend to it. Not attending properly may result either in hysterical fear, or in the cynical conviction that there is nothing to be done. Curtis's book serves to focus the mind on reality, and is full of a practical, even optimistic, vision.

The last chapter is addressed directly to the home secretary, in the form of a letter. Her basic message to Jack Straw is: "You are so careful to fall in with what you see as the public mood that you continue to spend money on extreme measures to contain young people away from home... rather than strengthen projects in the community to reform and divert them from crime."

Curtis argues that there has been enough research over the past years to make plausible the claim that we know how to "reform" and "divert" young criminals. She gives various examples of successful community ventures, day centres, systems of mentoring, all of them aimed at giving young people enough to do, offering them attainable goals and, where possible, allowing them to make some reparation for their crimes. Some of these ventures have already been abandoned for lack of money; but many remain. She praises the system of "remand fostering," where trained foster

parents provide a proper home for children awaiting trial who would otherwise be imprisoned in secure accommodation, where the suicide rates are high, and where shortage of trained staff means that children are kept locked in their rooms for hours at a time. All community-based schemes are expensive; but they are cheaper than secure accommodation. They also have the advantage that they treat offending children as people with human needs. It is crucial that money should be spent on what works rather than on what is known to make matters worse. (Drugs, for example, are known to be easily available in all secure accommodation, as in all prisons.) And it is terrifying to think that public policy over juvenile criminals should be dictated by the moral intuitions of the pub bore.

As for preventing children from becoming criminals in the first place, Curtis recognises the difficulties, but she is not, even here, defeatist. She insists that children who are to grow up to act morally well must be given the facts upon which moral judgements must be founded. She argues, for example, that children must be taught the economic facts about how damaging shop-lifting is, usually to other people at the bottom of the pile. She says that children who shop-lift often have a misguided Robin Hood concept of the rich (the shop-owners, the establishment, the state itself) who will never miss what is stolen. (One of the children she talked to stole baby clothes from department stores to give to neighbours who were in manifest want). Equally sensibly, she holds that children must be taught at school the facts about car insurance, so that they realise the risks to others, as well as to themselves, of taking and driving vehicles without insurance to cover them. Such knowledge, she insists, can and should be taught at school.

Important as such knowledge is to the forming of moral judgements, Curtis does not address-or does not solve-the real problem of moral education. How are we to teach children not only to know the difference between right and wrong, but to act upon that knowledge? Long before children can be expected to take in the economic consequences of theft from supermarkets, they must be taught to want to be good rather than bad, to develop an inner sense of what it would be shameful to do. And for this they need people who, from their earliest childhood, are able to transmit a sympathy for other people and a gut understanding of what is a decent and what is a horrible way to treat others. If parents cannot provide this kind of emotional education, then it must fall to teachers to do so.

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