

A Perfect Storm? The Decarceration of Children in England and Wales and the Implications for Practice.

Abstract

The metaphorical use of the term ‘perfect storm’ as a coincidence of events has been applied to the conditions that led to a decrease in the level of incarceration for children in England and Wales in the 1980s. Simply put, the three main factors seen as contributing to this decline were; the prevailing economic conditions that exposed the cost of spiralling incarceration, a political administration receptive to organisations with practice and research expertise, and an active, organised set of practitioners, passionate about the abolition of custody for ‘juvenile offenders’.

This paper examines *contemporary* political, economic and other factors (both local and global) in order to make comparisons with the decrease custody rates that took place in the 1980s and how changes in ‘penal policy’ might impact on social work practice with ‘young offenders’.

The paper’s aim is thus to gauge the likelihood of a second ‘perfect storm’ occurring in England and Wales that would lead to similar decreases in custody rates for children over the next decade and examines the implications for social work with children in conflict with the law. Contexts include the ‘global recession’, policy initiatives from the *Home Office* and the *Ministry of Justice* as well as more speculative factors such as contemporary constructions of youth, gangs and anti-social behaviour. Decarceration is contextualised within the wider concept of deinstitutionalization.