

Kids Behind Bars

UK documentary : 2001 : dir. Kate Blewett & Brian Woods : BBC / True Vision : 90 min
 prod: Kate Blewett & Brian Woods : scr: : dir.ph.:

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 Executive producer: Alex Holmes

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Radio Times review:

“From petty criminals serving heavy sentences to convicts who have hardened at a tender age, this documentary on children in prison around the world examines their lives and whether they are likely to benefit from their incarceration.”

“This is such a sad documentary, filled with a litany of heartbreaking stories from children in institutions around the globe. Most have been imprisoned for relatively minor offences and left languishing by the indifference of their families and the judicial authorities.

The documentary’s makers – the team behind the award-winning “**Dying Rooms**” and “**Eyes of a Child**” – take us to a junior jail in Manila where children are penned into cells with barely any room to sit down. And there is a ruthless pecking order. The older boys take the relatively cool floor to sleep on, while the

young ones are confined to the fetid air of the top bunks.

In New Mexico an angry 15-year old girl hurls abuse at staff in her detention centre. Yet, when she calms down, she is reflective and incisive. “I can see myself going down my mom’s path,” she tells us, with some perception.

Kids Behind Bars is hardly easy viewing, but it is handled with great sensitivity. Though there are niggling feelings that some of the children may be playing up for the cameras, in the end the overall handling of a difficult subject outweighs such worries.” – Alison Graham

Broadcast BBC1 November 26th 2001. “Locking kids behind bars,” concludes this programme, “is not the answer to child crime”. Of course, it doesn’t venture any suggestion what that “answer” might be exactly, but it’s the sort of wishy-washy conclusion one might have expected. No-one, after all, will ever be heard to advocate “locking kids behind bars”. Petty criminals, like the poor, (very much like the poor indeed) are always with us, and while society is unable to address the root causes of poverty, imprisonment is merely seen as the humane alternative to transportation, execution, or lopping people’s hands off, which are just some of the alternative remedies history has applied.

The viewer can take one of two positions on imprisonment of legal “minors” (which is what the film seems to mean by children) – it is regrettable but necessary, until a more workable solution is found; or it is indefensible on principle, because special rules must be applied to children, even when they break the law. The film sees only one possible position, and underlines it with a gently heart-rending background score, and plenty of close-ups of teary-eyed juveniles, or small faces pressed against iron bars. Subtlety is not its strong suit.

Anyone who has seen the inside of a police cell or an adult prison, anyone who has been through the mill of a courtroom trial, will need no persuading (by people who haven't) that prison is a dehumanising mechanism. Prison gives the lie to that argument so often forwarded by campaigners for the abolition of corporal punishment – that physical punishment was a sanction applied only to children, never adults. In reality **all** authority in the adult world, between individuals or between nations, derives from the sanction of physical compulsion, or brute force. Prison is the ultimate corporal punishment for adults, except in those states which still cling doggedly to the death penalty. Prison, contrary to popular assumption, is actually a relatively recent invention – no more than 150 years old – and society is still trying to strike the right balance between deterrence and rehabilitation in its prison regimes. Finding that optimum balance is no easy matter, as the film inadvertently reveals.

But **"Kids Behind Bars"** is not concerned with the deeper questions or historical perspective. It sets out to illuminate what it sees as a worldwide social injustice, with glimpses of the penal conditions in a half dozen institutions and the fates of sample inmates. Structurally, the film cuts back and forth between kids at an English secure unit and others in the States, in Brazil, Georgia, the Philippines, Mongolia, Turkey. The producers were denied access to Britain's own "young offenders institutions", so the comparison is at once invalid, but they cannot be faulted on that account. However, there is an air of liberal patronising about pointing out the squalid cell conditions of a prison in Mongolia, or the Philippines – as though adult detention facilities would not be every bit as squalid; as though children in a poor country have some inalienable right to the comforts enjoyed by their peers in the rich west. It is a false comparison on that account also.

It isn't difficult to feel pity for a 10-year old locked in some grey square stone cell with a dozen – or 71, in Manila – fellow unfortunates. It isn't hard to be touched by a boy breaking down when he learns, shortly after arrest, that his mother has cancer. These are human stories, and we respond as humans to them, but the programme is guilty of using those emotions to make its case without addressing any of the problems. It has nothing to say on juvenile crime, nothing to say on inadequate parenting, nothing to say on the worldwide scourge of drugs, nothing to say on the adolescent gang mentality and its brutish violence. It just shows us that prison is a bit of a nasty place, and perhaps we guessed as much, thank you.

These notes summarise the places and faces the film takes in over 90 minutes, and the comments interpolated by the makers:

"Almost half a million children are locked up round the world... mostly for persistent but quite minor offences"

UK:

"There are 3,500 child prisoners in the UK – more than anywhere else in Western Europe. It costs up to £3,000 a week to keep a child in a secure unit."

At an English "secure unit" (a lower-scale juvenile prison) Paul is doing time for stealing Pokemon cards. He's white, overweight, dyslexic, age about 11. He thinks he ought to be given some "behaviour" tablets, to stop him getting into trouble again when he's released. Sam, female, 15, white, blames her situation on her parents' divorce, which started her on drugs and alcohol. *"It's the violence that comes when she loses her temper that causes her problems."* The interior of the unit looks like a plush new youth club. The kids may wear their own clothes, and staffing ratios are so high that "inmates are given almost 1-to-1 teaching in well-resourced units" (a luxury children on the outside certainly never enjoy). The individual bedroom/cells are spacious, with TV, CD players, comfortable beds, cushions, and no bars on the windows. In these pitiable surroundings, Sam talks about her urge for self-mutilation. The camera shows her curled up in foetal position on her bed, thumb planted in mouth, surrounded by stuffed toys. A heart-rending scene, to be sure. Paul, asked in his room how he feels about being locked up, answers "It's not very nice. It feels all upsetting. It's just not

very nice.” Paul, we’re told, “thinks he’s a bit of a hard nut” (which he didn’t on admission to the place). As his term progresses, so his self-esteem blooms: “I’ve got more muscles than I did” (he’s still flabby) “So if anyone starts, they’re goin’ to get it in the face!”. He muses about throwing some boy at school through a plate glass window. “What, and come back here?” the interviewer interjects. “That’d be alright, wouldn’t it!” Paul grins, “Well, it would and it wouldn’t..” And on the day of his release at the end of the film, he says coyly to one of the wardens “I’m getting’ all upset! I don’t wanna leave”, and confides to the camera crew “I’m not lookin’ forward to goin’ home and getting’ out. I’m concerned about my life.”

MONGOLIA:

Enkbata, about 12, lived with his grandma. He tells us he was forced into stealing by two men who threatened to kill him if he didn’t. A boy of 9 explains how he was arrested along with another boy who, unbeknowns to him, had stolen a mobile phone. He is huddled in a bare stone cell with a dozen boys and youths of various ages, one of whom has told him to expect a minimum sentence of two years. He looks very afraid. *“Sometimes, locked up for months on end, children like X and Y lose more than their freedom”* the programme announces with stunning vacuousness, *“they lose their childhood”*. No elaboration is offered.

U.S.A.

THE PHILIPPINES:

In a Manila prison, Eugene, 12, explains that he and his brother were arrested at gunpoint in the middle of the night and hauled away in handcuffs, their parents struggling to hold onto them. When told he was being charged with rape, he asked who the accuser was and insisted he didn’t know her. “Why would I rape someone I don’t know?” he pleads, “We don’t know how to rape!”. The accuser, a 21-year old woman, subsequently withdrew the charges, by which time Eugene had been in prison seven months. The youngest inmate in his cell, which he shares with 70 other boys and youths, is Sandy, ±9. Sandy is therefore at the bottom of the cell pecking order, and we see him being ordered by an older youth to fetch a bucket, just to prove the point. Sandy is a runaway, caught stealing iron from a scrap yard. “If you put a child in prison his mind changes” Eugene says, and tells how one becomes hardened to prison by prison, so less fearful of the law.

GEORGIA:

BRAZIL:

In Sao Paolo, Vitor-Hugo Carnaval, 12, was high on crack cocaine when arrested. His mother visits him before the court hearing to announce she’s been diagnosed with cancer. She pleads with Vitor to reform, and he breaks into tears. He’s given a six-month sentence but is later released on parole. His mother expresses her fears that he’ll be able to stay out of trouble once the memory of prison has faded. Two months afterwards he was arrested again for robbery.

We should remember the “children” who stabbed to death schoolboy Damilolah Taylor last year in Peckham, south London; the children who tortured and murdered Jamie Bulger, 6, on a Liverpool railway line; the “children” who stabbed and hacked to death a headmaster at his school gates when defending a younger boy from attack; the “children” who gang-raped a woman on a London canal path; the children who doused a friend in petrol and set light to him

during a petty squabble between them; and of course the seemingly endless procession of American kids who have sprayed their own classmates with gunfire. To portray children as a “victim” class, merely because they are smaller and more photogenic than adults, is only another way of prostituting them.

Children are subject to all the same vices and social pressures as adults are. If greater urgency and effort is expended on rehabilitating them, then it is, self-evidently, the adult prisoners who are the neglected ones, the ones completely discarded by their society. Just as adult refugees tend to get less exposure on the tabloid front pages than pretty little refugee children. Just as adult-centred charities fall completely by the wayside in the annual orgy of fundraising for child-based charities – “Children in Need”. This reverence of children is hypocritical, dishonest about what children really are, and masks society’s underlying contempt for their ability to function independently. It locks children into a dependency trap – but that is the one childhood prison we will never see exposed in documentaries like this.

See subject index under **ASIA, DOCUMENTARIES, PRISON / BORSTAL / REFORM SCHOOLS** and **SOUTH & CENTRAL AMERICA**.