

The historical criminology of ‘safeguarding’

Children in the secure estate, 1960-2016

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ABSTRACT This paper examines the methodological tensions and synergies between historical criminological research and contemporary policy imperatives, through the lens of a commissioned study on child protection in the secure estate (1960-2016). Drawing on research conducted for Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), we analyse how the absence of institutional memory in government departments has shaped approaches to safeguarding policy. The paper critiques present-centred policy research methodologies that risk overlooking historical conceptualisations of abuse and protection. Through the case study of Medomsley Youth Detention Centre, we demonstrate how archival materials must be read ‘against the grain’ to understand how institutional practices could conceal abuse behind bureaucratic narratives of efficiency and order. We argue that effective safeguarding requires moving beyond policy compliance to recognise it as an iterative, contested process. This analysis holds important implications for how historical criminological approaches can inform contemporary child protection policy while remaining alert to the complexities of institutional memory and archival interpretation.

Keywords: child abuse, youth custody, youth justice, historical criminology, safeguarding

1 Availability

Paper text and slides available via <https://www.repository.cam.ac.uk/handle/1810/291976>.