We are told, “It will happen again.”

Once again, the nation has been in a state of shock as details of the torture and killing of a young child have come to light. The facts, as they have been reported, are truly horrific and quite naturally, there has been public outrage - not only that the killing took place, but also that it might just have been prevented. There are many searching questions still to be asked about the circumstances of the tragedy. In England and Wales last year, 5,300 cases of child cruelty and neglect were on record with the police. Out of ninety people jailed for cruelty to children, 38 of them were women.

It is only six years ago that Myra Hindley died, concluding 37 years in custody for the murders of five children between July 1963 and October 1965. The sentencing of people like Myra Hindley remains the subject of great debate. At the end of her trial, the judge, Mr Justice Atkinson recommended that she should serve a "very long time". There was bitterness towards her until the very end of her life. At her funeral, there were merely twelve or so mourners. A banner reading “Burn in hell” was left at the entrance to the crematorium.

There may be a measure of public satisfaction when serious crime incurs a severe penalty but at the point when a prisoner is “taken down”, public scrutiny of that individual is no longer permitted. Prisons are closed institutions and relatively few members of the public ever go inside them. Even prisoners’ families see only the visits area. Entry to the wings, dining room, gymnasium, classrooms, health centre and workshops is severely restricted.

Do we ever ask ourselves who really pays the price of crime? Prisoners are not necessarily close to home and if their families have limited resources, visiting may be difficult and expensive – particularly by public transport. Children are suddenly without the support of a parent. The entire family has to cope with social stigma.

We might feel inclined to leave the care of prisoners to the professionals – prison officers are, after all, dedicated and highly trained people. We may take the view (without actually knowing) that prisoners have an easy life behind bars and that the funding for their education and training would be better diverted to schools and health care within the community.

Nevertheless, within a civilised society, there must be safeguards to ensure that prisoners (whatever their offences) are treated with dignity. Their sentences, as determined by the courts, are not intended to subject them to abuse – of any kind. When prisoners have genuine problems, they must have someone to whom they can turn.

Could you have talked to Myra Hindley? Someone had to. Are you sufficiently objective to listen to a prisoner’s concerns – perhaps relating to family matters - without allowing your emotions to cloud your judgment? Independent Monitoring Boards provide an invaluable service to
prisoners, to government ministers and to the community. The work is voluntary and unpaid but it is challenging and always rewarding. For further information…

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