

Jail makes paedophiles worse, experts say

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Serving a five year jail sentence may not rehabilitate former Majlis Amanah Rakyat (Mara) scholar Nur Fitri Azmeer Nordin, who was convicted in London for child porn charges.

The Imperial College mathematics student was sent to jail after he plead guilty to charges of possessing, distributing and producing still and moving pornographic images of children at a London court this week.

However, studies have shown that locking him up would actually make it worse for both him and potential victims, forensic psychiatrist Bill Glaser wrote in the Australian Institute of Criminology Research and Public Policy Series No 12 on Paedophilia Policy and Prevention.

The series followed the AU\$100 million Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service, also known as The Paedophile Inquiry, in 1997.

"Modern behaviour techniques, particularly cognitive behaviour therapies, relapse prevention and pharmacological methods aim to make the offender take responsibility for his actions, reduce the level of his deviant sexual arousal and develop strategies to deal with situations where he is at risk of re-offending.[...]

"The simple incarceration of offenders, however, has no, or even an adverse effect. Harassed, abused and locked up in 'protection' for their offences, they simply become more secretive [...], and invent more elaborate and cruel fantasies to occupy their time until they are released," he wrote.

Acting on fantasies

Is Nur Fitri considered a paedophile?

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders defines paedophilia as a condition where a person aged 16 and above has intense and recurrent sexual urges towards pre-pubescent children.

These include fantasies, and does not necessarily mean that the person acts on these desires.

From a law enforcement perspective, a paedophile has a tendency to amass an extensive collection of child pornography, said Kylie Miller, senior analyst at the National Crime Authority in the same series.

London Metropolitan Police found more than 30,000 pornographic images of children on

Nur Fitri's electronic devices and Nur Fitri (photo) himself sitting next to a life size mannequin of a little boy, local media reported.

Can he be rehabilitated, as hoped by Mara chairperson Annuar Musa and Mara councillor Nazir Hussin Akhtar Hussin?

Glaser cites Australian research which boasts long-term recidivism - a term to describe relapse to criminal behaviour - of six percent among those who underwent therapy.

The control group which did not go through therapy had a recidivism rate of 35 percent.

"This is not a plea for mercy for these undoubtedly cunning and devious offenders.

"However, from a pragmatic point of view, we have to realise that nearly all child sex abusers will be released back into the community sooner or later, following which they can take the opportunity to offend again and again," he warned.

"Rather than locking them up for long periods of time, we must give them the skills and the incentives to keep themselves out of trouble," Glaser wrote.

Success rates

But success rates of "treatment" varies.

Canadian research found that 14 percent of child molesters relapse after treatment, while the chances are greater at 40 percent among those who molest boys (which make up the majority of such offenders), former New South Wales senior counsel John Nicholson writes in the series.

The New Zealand Justice Department's figures shows a dramatic difference - 67 percent recidivism among untreated prisoners and 30 percent among those treated.

"Whatever the figures, it seems clear that double digit percentage of offenders are less likely to be recidivists if offered treatment," Nicholson argued.

Even so, he said, the extent of the offence also comes into play.

"Sex offenders with deviant sexual preferences, including sadism, history of violence and substance abuse related to violence have a poorer prognosis in treatment than others," he wrote.

Researchers argue that treatment for sex offenders, including paedophiles, is best done in a correctional facility because there is a need to establish that such behaviours are wrong.

In the UK where Nur Fitri was sentenced, the National Audit Office 2014 report said more and more sex offenders are released at the end of their sentence without treatment, which

cost 23,000 pounds per prisoner.

How many in Malaysia?

Nur Fitri will be deported to Malaysia immediately after serving his five year sentence.

His rehabilitation while in a UK correctional facility has a direct impact on whether there will be another potential child predator on Malaysian streets.

But while Nur Fitri at least has a chance of treatment in a UK prison, there is no equivalent in Malaysian prisons, UM researchers Zaizul Abdul Rahman, Ab Aziz Mohd Zain and Fakhrol Abdul Kadir said in a 2013 paper.

Data on sex offenders in Malaysian prisons is also scarce, with a UM study published in 2012 being the first to gather data on the subject.

A total 147 prisoners took part in the UM study and more than half had victims below the age of 18. Ten percent of their victims were primary school-goers.

Consider also that police data show that child sexual abuse reports, including rape, has jumped from 1,710 cases in 2006 to 2,658 four years later.

Unicef estimates that only 10 percent of sexual abuse cases involving children are reported.

So beyond Nur Fitri, the bigger question arising from these numbers is this - How many of these child sex abusers are we sending back out to communities across Malaysia, just waiting to strike again?