Perhaps the greatest strength of this monograph is the final chapter on “Children’s Employment in the 1990s” where White compares forms of work that are considered to be “acceptable” with those that are considered “unacceptable”. Here, it is noted that the views of those who seek to act on behalf of children and of the children themselves may diverge dramatically. White makes an excellent point when he observes that it is often considered acceptable for children to work in unpaid or family work, or for pocket money, but not when they need to work (p. 47). This point would be well taken into account by those who seek to abolish all forms of children’s work by whatever means are available.

This monograph provides an extremely useful historical overview of legislation and is both stimulating and challenging. White by no means advocates the abandonment of children to the workforce, instead he calls for greater protection. Nor does he suggest that all forms of child work are acceptable, rather he argues that some forms of work are unacceptable regardless of age, and that these situations are best dealt with through legislation other than that aimed specifically at ending children’s involvement. The monograph takes up several controversial issues, plunging into the existing discourse, adopting a distinct approach and strongly supporting the empowerment of children. As such, it is perhaps not the ideal text for those seeking an introduction to the debates and issues surrounding child labour. It does, however, offer an extremely useful perspective to those with some knowledge of the issue. In particular, it is food for thought for those who hold to the abolish-it-now school of thought and advocate the linkage of child labour and trade sanctions, often without consideration of the children themselves. Despite being somewhat sparse on discussion of more recent legislation and views in Indonesia, this monograph is a valuable contribution to current debates on children, work and child labour.

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“all my ribs were purple. A new boy came in and I tried to help him so he wouldn’t get beaten up, and then a guard pulled us both up and he slapped both of us and then he told me to raise my arms and he beat my ribs until they were purple and blue and I didn’t tell my mom cause I knew she would start something”.

Grey walls, high chain-link fences, lavatories with no doors – this is the environment where some of Louisiana’s most disadvantaged and damaged children are kept. According to the Human Rights Watch report, Children in Confinement in Louisiana, the children are frequently beaten by the guards and kept in isolation for long periods of time.
The report is the outcome of a visit to Louisiana in March and May 1995 by the Children’s Rights Project of Human Rights Watch. Project workers interviewed more than sixty of the children locked up in the four secure juvenile institutions and spoke to lawyers, judges, staff and officials, private individuals working in the juvenile justice system under contract, and people working at the Federal Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention and at the US Department of Justice. During the first visit the project workers visited two correctional facilities where they were not allowed to speak to the children. This led to a substantial exchange of letters with the Secretary of the Department of Public Safety and Corrections. Permission was then given and in the subsequent visit the researchers were able to talk to whichever children they wished in private and out of sight of staff.

The report notes that Louisiana is one of the poorest states in the USA. It has one of the highest rates of children living in poverty and children not in school or at work. Large numbers of children, especially black children, are suspended from school. Louisiana also has a very high rate of locking up children. Each year about 1500 children are held in secure institutions. For the purposes of the report “children” are defined as those aged under eighteen. The age of criminal responsibility is eleven.

The report describes the system for keeping children in custody in Louisiana. There are four institutions catering for children aged between eleven and seventeen. Three are run by the State. The fourth, which opened in November 1994 in the town of Tallulah, is run by a private company, Transamerican Development Associates. According to the report, “The location was chosen for economic development purposes”. The Louisiana Department of Public Safety and Corrections pays a fee for each child incarcerated at the Tallulah institution. When the institution started taking children in November and December 1994 there were considerable problems. The staff were unable to keep control. Some of the children claim that they were bussed there in the middle of the night from other institutions without being told where they were going or what was happening to them. In December 1994 the Federal court declared a state of emergency at the institution and the management of it was passed back to the State authorities.

Given the racial disparity in the adult prison population in the US it is no surprise that Human Rights Watch found a high proportion of the children in the institutions were African-American. In one the proportion was 88 percent and the lowest, at Bridge City, was 73 percent. The proportions of African-American staff in the four institutions were similarly high.

In the report Human Rights Watch sets the conditions they found in Louisiana against the international and domestic standards applicable to the treatment of juveniles in custody. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child calls for detained children to be treated with humanity and accords all children the right to maintain contact with parents, exercise free expression, and have access to health and education. Five other UN documents supplement these basic provisions.

The report helpfully introduces the researchers’ findings under each heading with a reference to the relevant international standards. Thus, physical conditions should promote health and human dignity and be in accord with the rehabilitative aims of juvenile justice.

The report then describes the physical conditions they found. In the Tallulah institution: