



*A New
Start:
Young
Adults
in the
Criminal
Justice
System*

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A) is a broad coalition of organisations and individuals working to improve the life chances of young people in their transition to adulthood, who are at risk of committing crime and falling into the criminal justice system. We believe that there must be a wholesale shift in the way the Government works with young adults in, and at risk of becoming involved with, the criminal justice system. The purpose of this paper is to offer policy recommendations for further and widespread consultation.

Young adults aged 18-24 are in a distinct stage of life, and are not yet fully mature adults. The needs of young adult offenders are acute. Over half of young adults are unemployed on arrest and a third have a basics skills deficit compared with a quarter of prisoners over 25 years of age. Young adults in the criminal justice system are more likely to abuse alcohol than both older and younger prisoners. At least a quarter of young men in prison are fathers. Young adults have higher rates of self-harm and suicide, are also more likely than older prisoners to have been in the care system.

The current cost to the taxpayer of dealing with young adult offending is vast. Despite making up 9.5% cent of the population, young adults (between 18 and 24) commit a third of all crime, represent a third of people sentenced to prison each year, and take up a third of Probation caseload. Young adult crime costs the taxpayer between £16.8 – 20 billion per year. It costs £50,000 per year to keep a young adult offender in prison. This represents little value for money with reoffending rates remaining persistently high at around 75%.

This major paper aims to set out a radical agenda of policy proposals to transform the way in which young adults are treated. The full paper includes 21 recommendations, all of which we hope legislators and policy makers will take into consideration. Below are the top twelve key proposals from the policy areas focussed on in the report, which are:

- Policing and Community Involvement
- Sentencing and courts
- Custody and Community
- Work and education
- Health, Housing and social care
- Drugs/alcohol

Key Recommendations for the Criminal Justice System

RECOMMENDATION ONE

We recommend that more effort is made to divert young adults involved in minor crime away from the criminal justice system and into paths that will address the root causes of their behaviour. We believe the police should be able to take a triage approach i.e. make an immediate assessment of need, and assess the likely benefit from a community intervention. They should have a range of options to ensure young people are diverted into the right help.

RECOMMENDATION TWO

We recommend increased investment in the training of police officers in conflict management, and in particular how to assess and respond to the specific needs and challenges of the young adult age group.

RECOMMENDATION THREE

We recommend that new methods are introduced to ensure that the distinctive characteristics of young adults are taken into account when they are sentenced by the courts. 'Youthfulness', as defined by the Sentencing Advisory Panel, should be seen as a potential mitigating factor in sentencing young adults between the ages of 18 and 24.

RECOMMENDATION FOUR

We recommend the Government make it a priority to reduce the UK prison population, starting immediately with the reduction of the number of vulnerable young adults in custody serving short sentences for non-violent crimes. We recommend further research into the most effective means to achieve this, including research into the benefits of abolishing altogether prison sentences of six months or less, and ensuring their direct replacement with community sentences.

RECOMMENDATION FIVE

We recommend that Youth Offending Services and Probation Services improve the transitional arrangements for young people who move from supervision by the youth justice to the adult criminal justice system. The best models such as nominating a lead professional to coordinate supervision should learn from the experience of three T2A pilot schemes, which are currently underway.

RECOMMENDATION SIX

We recommend that the availability of the sentence of Detention in a Young Offender Institution should be extended to 18-24 year-olds, and that the structure of this regime should be radically overhauled to promote rehabilitation programmes to facilitate better the reintegration into society. We further recommend that young adults should be located in dedicated local community prisons twinned with local further education colleges.

RECOMMENDATION SEVEN

We recommend the establishment of a national employment programme for ex-offenders. In order to mitigate the perceived risks by business, we further recommend that the Government should provide financial incentives such as tax relief and cash rewards. Offenders should be able to count time in custody as being unemployed in order for business to receive the £2,500 currently offered to companies who employ unemployed young adults.

RECOMMENDATION EIGHT

We recommend the implementation of a new system of 'CRB Smart' for young adults. Criminal convictions should only be declared if relevant to the job being applied for. The Probation Service could decide the relevant declarations on the basis of the job role.

RECOMMENDATION NINE

We recommend much greater opportunities for diverting young adults with mental health problems into treatment along the lines of proposals made by the Sainsbury's Centre for Mental Health.

RECOMMENDATION TEN

We recommend that all young adults leaving custody should receive similar support and supervision to those young adults leaving care, including a social worker and personal advisor. They should have a full assessment of all of their needs, as well as a plan of how these will be met on release. Social services must provide or arrange suitable accommodation if the young person's welfare requires it. These arrangements need to be in place in advance of the young person's release from custody.

RECOMMENDATION ELEVEN

We recommend that community sentences rather than prison is used for most young people with substance misuse problems who are convicted of relatively minor offences. We further recommend that there should be increased use of Drug Rehabilitation Requirements as part of community orders. This drug treatment must be flexible for young adults, both male and female, with chaotic lives.

RECOMMENDATION TWELVE

We recommend the expansion of drug and alcohol treatment programmes tailored to address trends in young adult drug use. Trends that need special support include polydrug use and use of 'softer' drugs, such as alcohol and cannabis, rather than simply opiate-based addictions. Alcohol abuse should be treated as a priority for action, alongside drug abuse, as it is now a major cause of reoffending.

Conclusion and Next Steps

This report has argued that some young adults are being trapped in a cycle of reoffending. They have been let down by a lack of essential mainstream support and ended up in a poorly devised and failing criminal justice system. It is time for a new approach.

Consultation responses will be collated and will contribute to the final set of policy recommendations to be published by the T2A Alliance in autumn 2009. Further details of the consultation can be found at

www.t2a.org.uk/alliance.

The T2A Alliance formed because we believe that we can make a difference to the lives of young adults more effectively together than apart. But we cannot make a difference without widespread support and challenge from practitioners, young adults, policy makers and the general public. For this reason, if you support the overall aims of the Alliance to improve policy and practice for vulnerable young adults in the criminal justice system, we ask you to sign up online and support us at

www.t2a.org.uk/support_us

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