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## Submission to Justice Committee Inquiry: Children and young adults in the Secure Estate

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## Submission to Justice Committee Inquiry

Dr Jayne Price

### Children and Young Adults in the Secure Estate

We now have a ten-year picture of transitions data (YJB 2020, 2026). This shows that despite the decline in the number of children and young people within youth custody, the proportion of those transitioning to the over 18 estate peaked 2021/2022 and is in the most recent data, slightly higher than where published records began.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Custody population (including 18 years and older)	1,135	1,049	960	986	942
Number transition to over 18 estate	406	358	318	349	<b>363</b>
% of population making transition	36%	34%	33%	35%	39%

2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
855	643	522	504	580	528
<b>360</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>190</b>
42%	46%	52%	31%	28%	38%

As a proportion of the ‘release type’ transitions similarly peaked 2021/2022 and again are slightly higher than ten years ago<sup>1</sup>:

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Total releases	3,192	2,730	2,347	2,232	2,720
Number transition to over 18 estate	406	358	318	349	<b>363</b>
Proportion	13%	13%	14%	16%	13%

2020	2021	2022	2023	2024	2025
2,421	1,559	1,405	1,268	1,427	1,354
<b>360</b>	<b>296</b>	<b>269</b>	<b>155</b>	<b>165</b>	<b>190</b>
15%	19%	19%	12%	12%	14%

<sup>1</sup> Please note that data published within the 2018/19 statistics bulletin do not contain ‘change of legal basis’ numbers and the 2019 ‘release type total’ figure differs across the YJB 2020 and YJB 2026 publication. The 2019 figure presented here is taken from YJB 2026 published data. I sought clarity on this matter and was advised that figures published in the 2018-2019 Youth Justice Statistics were correct estimates at the time of publication but have been subject to later revision demonstrating a more complete picture. For these reasons, release type and legal basis end-type data are not fully comparable across years, and caution should be used when attempting to reconcile figures between publications. Legal basis end-type data in its current form cannot be consistently reproduced for earlier years (such as 2015), as the necessary classifications were not systematically recorded at that time.

This shows us that despite the reduction of children and young people within youth custody, the proportion of those transitioning remains stable and in need of great attention. There is an emerging literature base regarding the distinct vulnerability of young adults, how this is a formative stage of the life course with distinct needs alike that of children but distinctly different as they seek to transition to adulthood (see <https://t2a.org.uk/>). This has led in England and Wales there have been calls for a definition of young adulthood and a distinct approach within the CJS for those aged 18 to 24 years (Harris, 2015; House of Commons Justice Committee, 2018a; HM Inspectorate of Prisons, 2021).

**16. How effective is the planning and support for the transition of young people (aged 18+) into the adult prison system and are their complex needs adequately transferred and maintained?**

In terms of planning, my research has found a range of issues for children and young people owing to a distinct gap in policy and practice. Although the children and young people felt ready to move and progress through the system, they had little information and involvement through the transition and thus felt unprepared. Follow-up interviews with the same cohort post-transition revealed that the support they required post-transition was not available (Price, 2019, 2020). Transitions guidance (YJB, 2021; MoJ and HMPPS, 2022) recognises the importance of individual planning which is intended to take place from point of entry with preparation of placement three months in advance of transfer, and post-transition review three months after formal handover. Institutional placements should be determined on a case-by-case basis by a centrally co-ordinated Transitions Board. There remains a lack of information and clarity for children and young people about when they will transition (Alliance for Youth Justice, 2025).

The distinct needs of children and young people that are recognised within the YJS and responded to by the child-first approach of recognising strengths and potential (YJB, 2019) translate into the young adult estate, but the support does not transition over. The shift in child to adult custody is premised on risk with AssetPlus and OASys taking distinctly different approaches. The focus moves from welfare to control, security and risk (Price & Truner, 2021) and the distinct shift in approach between institutions and services means that transitions are distorted and hazardous (Goldson, 2019).

**17. To what extent should support for young adults (18-25) in custody be determined by their developmental needs rather than age?**

Recent data also shows that the number of those aged 18 years and over is raising significantly, representing 21% of the custody population in March 2025, compared to 9% in March 2015 (YJB, 2026). Whilst this demonstrates a retention of children and young people within youth custody holding young adults within child custody is appropriate for both populations, as explored in detail by the Alliance for Youth Justice (2025) who highlight how young adults have no or limited access to work, vocational, educational and constructive activities more appropriate for their age. Whilst HMPPS have applied more consideration to maturity towards young adults within prison, such an approach focuses upon deficits and its absence to the detriment of young adult sense of identity (see Coyle, 2019) in direct contrast with the strengths-based focus of the child-first approach.

**18. In what ways does treating offenders aged 18-25 as a separate cohort improve outcomes compared to their inclusion in the general adult prison population?**

There is limited focus upon young adults within the adult criminal justice system. Official statistics and categorisation relating to young adults is often limited to ages 18-20 years which undermines wider literature which calls for a definition of young adulthood to extend up to age 24 years. We therefore have an unclear picture of young adults within data.

Young adults have differing educational, employment, vocational needs to adults. They are undergoing a key social and developmental life-stage transition between dependence and independence as they move from child to adult. A recent pilot project within Newsham probation demonstrates how taking a developmentally appropriate approach can support young adults' distinct needs which are not met within the mainstream adult population (Phillips et al., 2024; 2025). This can improve outcomes for education and employment which are lacking otherwise. The pro-social approach to child-first is applicable to young adults but must not infantilise them. Therefore, a distinct approach, which recognises them as developmentally different from both children and adults is important for this distinct life-course stage. There is a lack of specific strategy for young adult women who move from STCs into adult prisons (Harris & Goodfellow with Bridge, 2021).

**19. To what extent is the current adult prison population environment suitable for addressing the welfare, safety and rehabilitative needs of young adults (18-25)?**

HMI Prisons (2021) have evidenced the numerous harms experienced by young adults across day-to-day life, relationships with staff, motivation within behaviour management schemes, involvement in violent incidents and adjudications. They highlight how this is worse for the overrepresented Black population. Upon moving between institutions, young adults experience a distinct shift in treatment and expectations and thus outcomes. They become absorbed within an adult population with much fewer staff which results in a decline of individualised care and support that can be offered (see Price, 2020). This can be detrimental to development and well-being. One of the most concerning shifts in treatment is the shift from minimising and managing physical restraint (MMPR) to control and restraint. MMPR is intended to place emphasis on staff relationships and deescalation, control and restraint is as the title suggests – premised more so on control and the use of force. This can re-traumatise a vulnerable population who are more likely to have a history of adverse childhood experiences, exacerbate violence within an institution and is detrimental to already lacking relationships with staff. This comes at the point of transition where a number of supportive services are also lost (see Price, 2021).

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