

Travelling in the right direction. A manifesto for transitions to adulthood

Shan Nicholas of the Barrow Cadbury Trust explains why action on young adults is needed and members of the T2A Alliance outline their priorities.

In the last 50 years the process of becoming an independent adult has changed beyond all recognition and the world of criminal justice has not and cannot escape the ramifications. Becoming independent happens later, is increasingly expensive, and frustratingly difficult to achieve. The traditional routes for unskilled workers are diminished, if non-existent. Now young people take longer than ever to support themselves, never mind a family. And once that first job is found it is more tenuous and insecure than for previous generations.

Work on adolescent development from across various disciplines shows that the delayed development of young adults is more than just an observed phenomenon. It is now recognised that maturation continues right up until the mid or even late 20s. Young adults are still fine-tuning

their ability to make reasoned and long-term judgments.

So what is the relevance for the world of criminal justice? The facts speak for themselves: while only making up 9.5 per cent of the population 18-24 year olds are convicted of a third of all crime; represent a third of those sent to prison; and a third of those on probation. Over the last 18 months the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance has started to pull together some of the best thinking, practice, and policy around young adults in trouble with the law. There is a growing appreciation that the criminal justice system is totally out of step with the societal norms around adulthood and is failing to recognise the distinct needs of those young people stuck between childhood and adulthood. There is also a lack of focus when it comes to dealing with common problems

associated with alcohol or drug dependency and on how to address mental health issues which disproportionately affect marginalised young adults.

With the help of over 200 organisations we propose some ten policy solutions—all benchmarked by practitioners working in the field and young people themselves. Of course, this is just a start. And like any manifesto we can only spell out a new direction of travel.

The most significant challenge for T2A remains that of convincing people that young adulthood is a distinct stage of life with its own challenges and increasing pitfalls. Until we do this the change to policy will be slow. The year ahead will involve gathering young adults' opinions on the services already being provided in their name, as well as evaluating the three T2A pilots in Birmingham, West Mercia, and London. We will also continue to highlight our ten key policy proposals which fall into the following four key areas: diversion, sentencing, custody, and rehabilitation.

As ever, the causes and solutions to crime cannot be understood by the criminal justice agencies alone. These wider social and economic factors, as well as the development stage of young adults, help explain why so many are caught up in the system. More than ever young people need the tools to become an adult and a sense of belonging in order to find a new identity outside of crime. ■

Shan Nicholas is Interim Development Director at the Barrow Cadbury Trust. The trust fund and co-ordinate of the Transition to Adulthood Alliance.

The Howard League: *'prioritise support and accommodation'*

The work of the Howard League for Penal Reform's young adult legal team provides legal redress for young adults in the criminal justice system. We focus on the lack of suitable support and accommodation for our clients leaving custody.

The T2A alliance has finally put young people making the difficult journey from childhood to adulthood on the agenda. It has achieved this by supporting and bringing together for the first time those with expertise in and dedication to young adults. The alliance has reached out to mainstream policymakers and professionals who now recognise the transition to adulthood as a key stage.

Now is the time for legislators to take firm action to ensure that suitable support and accommodation is prioritised for this age group. Government policy and practices must recognise and provide for the needs this group in a holistic and accessible way. The alternative is a lost generation.

Anna Prasad, Solicitor and Legal Officer for Young Adults, Howard League for Penal Reform.

Criminal Justice Alliance: ‘turn talk into action’

Bringing together a disparate group of organisations to work jointly on an issue is never easy. But when a coalition of organisations can work towards a shared goal, as the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance has, this approach can have significant benefits, presenting a strong and united voice to politicians and policymakers. It is easier to ignore a single organisation than a coalition encompassing the leading experts in the field.

This has been the strength of the T2A Alliance. The issue of young adult offenders has long been ignored by policymakers, despite an extensive body of research demonstrating the need for a distinct approach to working with young adults in the criminal justice system. The priority for the T2A Alliance has therefore been to raise the profile of this issue, and to increase pressure on the government to take action.

The T2A Alliance has succeeded in focusing attention on young adult offenders. A serious discussion is now taking place about how young adults’ needs can best be met within the criminal justice system. This is a big step forward, and real progress that can be built on. The challenge now is to ensure that talk is turned into action.

Jon Collins, Campaign Director, Criminal Justice Alliance.

The Young Foundation: ‘we need innovation’

The case for treating young adults (18-24) as a distinct group with specific needs within the criminal justice system has already been made convincingly. The Young Foundation’s work on unmet needs has demonstrated that some of the most serious clusters of need are associated with transitions (out of custody, through bereavement, out of long-term unemployment, among others) and the ways in which people are helped to cope with them are often inadequate, missing the simple things that matter most, in particular durable and supportive social networks, a stable home and an adequate income. Every point of contact between transition makers and services should be taken as an opportunity to make positive connections and build relationships that will best help that person negotiate change. Support and preparation are key to successful transition to adulthood.

There are a number of ways for statutory agencies to support this transition, as outlined in recommendations of the T2A Young Adult Manifesto. Often the response to systemic failings is to do yet more with what is not working, at an increasing cost. Instead, they should be trying new approaches. One of the ways to do this is by unlocking the innovation capacity of local agencies, through incubators and innovation labs, and through new financial instruments such as social impact bonds which help realign incentives which are currently missing for local authorities to do prevention and diversion work.

Systemising the way in which innovation comes about is important. This is why the Young Foundation in partnership with the New York Center for Court Innovation recently embarked on a feasibility study for establishing a UK Centre for Justice Innovation, a body which could support, incubate, and disseminate innovation. One of the directions such a body may explore is transition to adulthood, an area where freeing up the innovation potential of the agencies involved is key to ensuring that young people at risk have a better chance of completing this major transition successfully.

Anton Shelupanov, Programme Leader, The Young Foundation.

Young People in Focus: ‘recognise age related needs’

The main achievement of the T2A Alliance has been in demonstrating the uniqueness of the young adult group, and through doing so underlining why young adult offenders, 18-24, require a different approach in helping steer them away from crime.

When reaching 18, a young person in the UK is legally considered an adult. They may enjoy adult privileges (drinking, gambling, voting, etc.) and must accept adult responsibilities. In reality, young people of this age have not nearly reached adulthood. They are in the process of transition.

Vulnerable young adults—i.e. those growing up amidst poverty and disadvantage, those leaving care, those with serious disabilities—face heightened challenges in their transition to adulthood, often living polarised existences from other young adults who go on to university and embark on professional careers. This is a particularly acute problem for young adults growing up in the criminal justice system (CJS).

Though young adults in the CJS are supported to a certain extent, through YOIs (young offender institutions) and certain third sector services, many still find themselves at the mercy of a system that they are not socially or developmentally equipped to deal with. The subsequent implications for recidivism are vast.

We need to continually drive the message home that young adult offenders should be recognised as a distinct group, and one in desperate need of support that meets their specific, unique, and age-related needs.

Kerry Devitt, researcher and co-author of the report *Young Adults Today*, Young People in Focus.
