

# Centre for Crime and Justice Studies submission to the Justice Committee inquiry: Children and Young Adults in the Secure Estate.

**13 March 2026**

## About the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies

The Centre for Crime and Justice Studies is an independent charity established in 1931. We seek to educate and inform about crime and criminal justice through research, events and collaboration, in pursuit of a fair, effective and accountable justice system.

## Our submission

This submission draws on the Centre's recent publication, *'Smaller, but tougher: How the criminal justice system is processing young adults'* (Tuv, 2025), which analyses Ministry of Justice administrative data on prosecution and sentencing for 18–24-year-olds between 2010 and 2024. This research was funded and supported by the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance, convened and funded by the Barrow Cadbury Trust.

The inquiry's examination of whether the adult estate is suitable for young adults is timely: our evidence suggests the system is holding fewer young adults, but holding them longer. This submission addresses Questions 17, 18 and 19 of the call for evidence on transitions to adult custody and the treatment of young adults (18–25) in the criminal justice system.

### Summary

**The evidence suggests that the justice system for young adults is increasingly populated by a smaller number of individuals serving longer sentences, more likely to have experienced custodial remand, marked by persistent ethnic disproportionality, including the compounding effect of evidenced disproportionality at earlier points in the criminal justice process, and including young women who may have been remanded for reasons other than the gravity of the offence.**

#### 1. The shrinking but intensifying young adult cohort

The number of young adults (18–24-year-olds) prosecuted for indictable and either-way offences fell by approximately 65 per cent between 2010 and 2024 from 126,510 to 43,843. Over the same period, the number of young adults sent to prison for those offences decreased by 60 per cent, and the number remanded in custody at Crown Court fell by 33 per cent. In absolute terms, the volume of young adults entering court in 2024 is roughly one-third of what it was in 2010. For context, the adult population aged 25 and over prosecuted for the same category of offences decreased by only 20 per cent over the same period, a markedly slower rate of decline. The young adult population itself decreased by

only around 2.4 per cent between 2010 and 2023, meaning these reductions are substantial in relative terms.

However, this reduction in scale has not been accompanied by a proportional reduction in custodial intensity. Although far fewer young adults are being prosecuted, those who are convicted are now more likely to receive an immediate custodial sentence than they were in 2010. Since 2010, the proportion of convicted young adults receiving immediate custody increased, while the use of community sentences declined substantially.

At the same time, average custodial sentence lengths increased markedly for young adults, rising from approximately 16.3 months in 2010 to 24.5 months in 2024, an increase of over 65 per cent. The combined effect is that the secure estate now holds a smaller number of young adults overall, but those present are serving longer custodial terms.

This pattern — a smaller cohort facing harsher outcomes — is consistent with wider trends documented in the 2025 Independent Sentencing Review, which identified sentence inflation as a structural feature of the system over the past 25 years. However, there are two specific implications worthy of consideration by the Committee. The first is that longer sentences for young adults prolong exposure to custodial environments at a developmentally sensitive stage. The second is that measures in the recent Sentencing Act such as a presumption to suspend short prison sentences, whatever their other merits, are likely to be out of scope for a significant proportion of the current young adults imprisoned.

Taken together, these trends point to a significant gap at the heart of criminal justice policy: there is no overarching government strategy for young adults, no dedicated minister, and no coherent framework that reflects what the considerable evidence tells us about this cohort. The T2A Alliance has called for a Young Adults Justice Strategy — a cross-departmental commitment to treat 18–25-year-olds as a distinct group whose responses to criminal justice intervention should be shaped by developmental maturity rather than age alone. This inquiry offers an opportunity for the Committee to recommend that the Government address that gap and set out a long-term plan.

## 2. Remand: Increased prominence

Remand has become increasingly central to young adults' experience of the criminal justice process and the secure estate. Although the absolute number of young adults remanded in custody has declined since 2010, consistent with falling prosecutions, the proportion of prosecuted young adults who are remanded has increased relative to the shrinking cohort. As a proportion of those appearing at Crown Court, those remanded in custody has increased from 44 per cent in 2012 to 50 per cent in 2024.

A substantial proportion of those remanded in custody do not ultimately receive an immediate custodial sentence. The data therefore suggest that remand is playing a more prominent role in determining young adults' exposure to the secure estate than headline sentencing figures alone might imply. A custodial remand that does not result in imprisonment matters on proportionality grounds. It also matters for this age group in

particular. Young adults are at a developmentally sensitive stage. Even short periods of pre-sentence custody can disrupt education, employment, housing and family ties.

### 3. Ethnic disproportionality: Persistent and widening

The 2017 Lammy Review identified significant over-representation of Black, Asian and minority ethnic groups across the criminal justice system. Our analysis of young adult data to 2024 indicates that these disparities have not narrowed, and in some respects have widened.

By June 2022, Black young adults accounted for approximately 20.6 per cent of the young adult prison population, up from about 18 per cent in 2016. Over a similar period, Black young adults in the general population increased from just under 4 per cent to just over 5 per cent.

The aforementioned rate of decline in young adult prosecutions has not been equal across ethnic groups. Research by Hartman and Hughes (2022) found that, by 2020, 'non-White' young adults were appearing in court at 1.7 times the rate of White young adults. Our research suggests that Black young adults were appearing at over three times the rate of White young adults for more serious offences.

Aggregate sentencing data also showed that ethnic minority young adults are more likely to receive custodial sentences and less likely to receive community sentences, compared with White young adults. While aggregate data cannot control for offence seriousness or plea, recent statistical studies, which controlled for offence type and case characteristics, have found ethnic disparities in:

- Charging decisions (CPS 2023),
- Consideration of past convictions (Sorsby, 2022),
- Custodial decisions (Lymperopoulou, 2024 and Pina-Sánchez et al., 2025),
- And certain subjective elements of sentencing, such as the assessment of remorse. (Guilfoyle and Pina-Sánchez, 2025).

While these studies were not specific to young adults, they indicate that the over-representation of ethnic minority young adults in custody follows a series of disparities in the way they are processed within the criminal justice system. Taken together, the contraction of the system has not eliminated inequality; rather, disproportionality remains embedded within a smaller and more intensive system.

A further concern is the quality of ethnicity recording in policing and Crown Court data. The proportion of young adults with 'unknown' ethnicity in court data rose from approximately 7 per cent in 2010 to 37 per cent in 2024, severely limiting the ability to monitor disparities over time. This directly contradicts the Lammy Review's recommendation that ethnicity data quality should be improved with every Race Disparity Audit.

#### 4. Gender disparity: Young women held on remand

Young women account for a small fraction of the young adult cohort in the criminal justice system, but their experiences reveal a specific systemic concern that aligns directly with the issues relevant to the Committee. 56 per cent of young women aged 18–24 who were remanded in custody at Crown Court went on to receive immediate custody, compared to 75 per cent of young men. In other words, young women remanded in custody are less likely than young men to ultimately receive a custodial sentence. The broader remand picture confirms this pattern. In March 2025, around 20 per cent of men of all ages in prison were on remand, compared with around 26 per cent of women. The disparity is even more pronounced among younger prisoners: approximately 42 per cent of young men aged 18–20 in prison were on remand, compared with 57 per cent of young women of the same age. More than half of young women aged 18–20 in custody had not yet been tried or sentenced.

These figures suggest that remand decision-making for young adult women may reflect responses to unmet social needs rather than the gravity of the alleged offence, raising concerns about proportionality and inappropriate use of the secure estate.

We are now nearly twenty years on from the Corston Report (2007) which recommended that women unlikely to receive a custodial sentence should not be remanded in custody, based on evidence that sentencers were not consistently applying this standard. Our data suggest this recommendation has not been fully implemented for young women. The Lord Chancellor, in her opening remarks to the Women’s Justice Board, stated that “we are sending too many women to prison. We are sending the wrong women to prison.” The remand data for young women supports the urgency of that concern.

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