

Behind the Decline:

How the criminal justice system is processing young adults

by Liat Tuv



CENTRE FOR CRIME
AND JUSTICE STUDIES

About the author

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Acknowledgements

Before proceeding to acknowledgments, I want to stress that any errors that have made it through to the final version of this report are entirely my own.

I would like first to thank everyone that gave their time to chat with me informally about this topic over the last six months. The insights they shared really helped shape the direction of research and, eventually, the structure of this report.

Thank you to the HMICFRS for clarifying some of the points in their 2023 report on Race and Policing. I am also very grateful to everyone who, on seeing sections of an early draft of this report, made helpful suggestions and recommended reading. This included Dr Caroline Bald, Dr Alexandra Cox, Naomi Delap, Heidi Dix, Nadine Hendrie, Dr Kitty Lymperopoulou, Njilan Morris-Jarra, Professor Jose Pina-Sánchez, Fionnuala Ratcliffe, Wayne Reid and others who prefer to stay anonymous.

I am grateful also to my colleagues Helen Mills, Mimi Marijetic and Richard Garside for their

support in shaping this research and for their helpful edits to the final draft.

Finally, this report was made possible by the generosity of T2A convened by Barrow Cadbury Trust, and the support of Annmarie Lewis OBE in particular. It was also immensely helpful to receive thoughtful feedback and questions from T2A alliance members at a T2A meeting in June this year, where I presented some aspects of this report.

Transition to Adulthood

Transition to Adulthood (T2A) is a Barrow Cadbury Trust criminal justice programme and campaign. Since 2009, T2A has been building the case for a distinct approach to policy and practice relating to young adults in the criminal justice system. By collaborating with criminal justice professionals, the voluntary and community sector, policy-makers and young adults themselves, T2A is building a body of evidence and good practice guidance. The T2A Alliance supports this programme of work – and consists of leading criminal and social justice organisations, including the Centre for Crime and Justice Studies. Alliance members collaborate on T2A's reports and resources – and have previously explored the experiences of young adults who have had repeat contact with the police, violence reduction, and problem-solving courts.



Registered charity No. 1115476.

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© Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, August 2026. ISBN: 978-1-918601-03-9.

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Executive summary

The last 15 years have seen a marked decline in the number of young adults (18–24) appearing in court for serious offences, and tougher sentencing outcomes for those that do. Ethnic disparity persists, young women continue to be remanded in cases with non-custodial outcomes, and the data needed to interrogate these trends is thinning. This report draws on literature, data, and conversations with experts, to find the roots of these trends, and reforms that could interrupt them.

Why does the system seem both smaller and tougher?

There are several drivers behind the decline, but the number of young adults with complex needs has remained constant. To understand why, this report examines youth diversion, which operates within narrow parameters of remorse, support and engagement, in which 'complex needs' are treated as exceptions and minoritised ethnic groups are disadvantaged.

Meaningful reform would need different diversion defaults. Practitioners' ability to take an intersectional, person-focused approach is limited by a power asymmetry between agencies.

What is driving ethnic disparity within that?

Drugs offences, an area of particular relevance to young adults, illustrate how disparity accumulates across policing, charging, prosecution, sentencing and rehabilitation. No individual practitioner or institution produces the aggregate pattern alone, but each has a potential lever for interrupting it.

Meaningful reform must be cross-institutional and built on a shared measure of success rather than each institution demonstrating progress within its own remit while the overall pattern holds.

Why is the ethnicity data missing?

Barriers to data collection are procedural and cultural, with little clarity about what the data is for.

Meaningful reform would need to reconnect data collection to purpose, as an accountability instrument that requires action. Plans to restructure local policing oversight provide an opportunity.

Why are young women still being remanded in non-custodial cases?

Remand is often used to manage unmet needs and the trend has persisted despite official reviews and legislative changes. Meanwhile, minoritised ethnic young women are disadvantaged when their unmet needs are more often seen through the lens of risk.

Meaningful reform depends on provision for the needs that remand is currently used to address, as well as recording reasons for remand decisions, so that legislative change can be shown to reach practice, and disparities in the attribution of risk and vulnerability can be scrutinised and addressed.

Change to long-standing, well documented problems is not possible through analytical work alone. It depends on a public and political debate willing to work from the evidence rather than around it. The evidence collected in this report suggests that every decision-maker, at every level and in every institution, has scope to interrupt the cumulative production of disparity. This is not by treating people differently on the basis of protected characteristics, but by ensuring they are not disadvantaged by the assumptions built into current practice.

Introduction

In *Smaller, but tougher* (Tuv, 2025) we looked at 15 years of aggregate court data to draw some broad conclusions about young adults (18-24) in the criminal justice system. We found that, while there are far fewer young adults ending up in court for serious offences, that smaller group are more likely to be remanded, less likely to receive a community sentence, more likely to receive a custodial sentence, and more likely to serve a longer sentence. Amidst these trends ethnic disparity remains (although the increasing gaps in ethnicity data makes it hard to tell to what extent) and young women are still being remanded (held in pre-trial custody) in cases that do not result in prison sentences. These conclusions raised a number of questions:

- Why does the system seem both smaller and tougher?
- What is driving ethnic disparity within that?
- Why is the ethnicity data missing?
- Why are young women still being remanded in non-custodial cases?

This report addresses those questions by looking beyond the court statistics to explain the trends. The account that follows is one in which disparity is not incidental but produced, cumulatively, institutionally, and in conditions of thin data. What that framing implies for meaningful reform is the question the conclusion returns to.

Smaller...

The number of young adults reaching court for serious offences (offences that are indictable or triable either way) decreased by 65 per cent between 2010 and 2024 (Tuv, 2025).¹ In part, the decrease in numbers of young adults can be explained in the same way as the relatively smaller decrease in numbers of older adults, which is that there has been a corresponding increase in the court backlog.² At the same time, the number of arrests has also decreased. According to the data available, the number of arrests of 18-to 20-year-olds has decreased by about 40 per cent since 2016 (from 90,913 to 53,336) and arrests of adults over 21 decreased by ten per cent (Home Office, 2025).

The decrease in young adults specifically could be due to a smaller underfunded system using its limited resources to focus on serious offences that young adults are less likely to commit. It could also be impacted by the success of diversion initiatives, out of court resolutions, and efforts to address the specific needs of young adults (like those piloted by the Transition to Adulthood alliance). We could also be seeing a knock-on effect from the even greater reduction in numbers of children entering the criminal justice system (assuming that a significant proportion of young adults first enter the system as children and, if diverted at that stage, would not end up in the system later).

...but tougher?

At the same time as the group of young adults has become smaller, it appears the system has become tougher, that is, more punitive. We could take increasing sentence lengths as evidence of this. Increasing sentence lengths

¹ Percentages calculated from data in the Ministry of Justice 'Outcomes by Offence' files (Ministry of Justice, 2025a).

² The outstanding criminal caseload in both Crown Court and magistrates' court in December 2025 was at its highest level since 2019 and nearly double the size it was in 2016 (Danechi, 2026).

are part of a wider, more general trend of sentence inflation that many have attributed to the introduction of statutory starting points for minimum terms for life in 2003, and then subsequent ratcheting up of those minimum terms, and sentences for lesser offences, over the following two decades (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2024; Gauke, 2025; Pina-Sánchez *et al.*, 2025a).

Given the increase we have seen in sentence lengths over the last two decades, it is also particularly worth considering the young adults whose custodial sentence began in childhood and the heavy toll of these sentences. Understanding how these young adults came to serve such sentences also reveals one driver of ethnic disparity in the system for children and young adults alike. In a recent report, based on focus groups with young men serving long sentences, Graham and Vince (2026) found that a number had been sentenced at 16 or 17. The report also specifically highlights the role joint enterprise convictions have played in the number of young adults serving long sentences, with Black young adults being the most affected, something we found in our recent research on multi-defendant statistics (Tuv *et al.*, 2026).

Another explanation for higher rates of remand and custody, which is not mutually exclusive with the punitive explanation, is that the way the criminal justice system is processing young adults has changed. The shift in balance from community to custodial sentences for serious offences, for example, could partly be due to a more punitive system. At the same time, young adults who were more likely to receive a community sentence (due to the nature of the offence and mitigating factors) may now be more likely to be successfully diverted from the criminal justice system much earlier.

One could conclude then that the smaller group of young adults now entering the criminal justice system are in court for the most serious offences and/or they were not successfully diverted from the system much earlier.

About this briefing

The aim of this briefing is to better understand who that smaller group of young adults in the criminal justice system now are, to explain the drivers of ethnic disparity in the data, and give more attention to the experiences of young women who often get lost in data-focused analyses (because they make up such a small number of the total).

This report brings together evidence from literature and research on ethnic disparity in the criminal justice system with a focus on youth and young adults, as well as the impacts on young women. It is also informed by conversations with individuals in and around the sector, including policy advisers, practitioners, academics, and researchers from arm's-length and third sector bodies.

This briefing, is divided into four sections.

- **Section one** looks beyond the young adult court data by reviewing some of the evidence on what happens before the age of 18 and before the courts (specifically diversion). The primary focus here is on ethnicity and the experience of young women because these are the two dimensions we looked at in the data, but we

look at compounding factors as well, such as social class, educational attainment, mental health, and substance misuse.

- **Section two** looks at the criminal justice system as a series of decision points, through which ethnic disparity is accumulated, to better understand these as opportunities to divert young adults who have not been diverted earlier. It takes low-level drugs offences as an example as these are more likely to involve young adults and thereby highlight some of the drivers of ethnic disparity that may be more specific to that age group.
- **Section three** looks at why ethnicity data is not being recorded as much as it was 15 years ago and considers the purpose of collecting this data and how it can be most effectively used to monitor and address disparity.
- Finally, **Section four** attempts to explain the rates of remand of young women as a way to explore the points raised in the first three sections.

These four sections form pieces of a puzzle. Each one indirectly builds upon the other in order to give a full picture, but they are also intended to work as standalone sections.

Sections two to four each take a statistical finding from *Smaller but tougher*, explain what lies behind it, and close with a summary about what its evidence implies for the shape of meaningful reform in that area. Section one however, addresses an important angle that *Smaller but tougher* missed, by looking at what happens to young people before they turn 18. The way in which children and young people are diverted or not to begin with is an integral part of the young adult story. While all the parts can be read on their own, this first section provides a foundation for the drivers explored in more detail in the three later sections.

1 A smaller cohort with complex needs

A finding to explain

In every section that follows this one a finding from *Smaller, but tougher* will be presented as a starting point and the section goes on to explain the drivers behind that trend.

In this section, however, the focus is on what *Smaller, but tougher* did not find, or rather, what it did not look for in the first place. In that report, the main data analysed were quarterly court statistics. Yet, to understand who ends up in court, it is also important to understand who is not successfully diverted from the path to court in the first place.

This section therefore looks back to the first point of contact with the criminal justice system, which for many young adults in the system takes place in childhood.

Diversion programmes offer an early way out of the system but there is an ethnic disparity in referrals to such programmes. This is further complicated by the intersection of ethnicity and, what have been termed as, 'complex needs'. Diversion programmes are not always designed to address a number of needs (such as mental health, food security, special education needs) at once, especially if the needs are not identified in the first place. The narrow focus also means that the decision to refer someone to the programme can be based on equally narrow and subjective assessments of what remorse or familial support look like, which disadvantages minoritised ethnic groups.³

In his forward to the recent White Paper *Cutting youth crime, changing lives*, the then Lord Chancellor David Lammy noted that, although fewer children are entering the justice system, the children who remain in the system today are often the most vulnerable, with the most complex needs" (Ministry of Justice, 2026a). A 2017 evaluation report on criminal justice initiatives for young adults noted a similar consensus of opinion in the sector. That is, practitioners in the criminal justice sector feel that the needs of those young adults entering the criminal justice system have become more complex (Wong *et al.*, 2017: 21). This may reflect an absolute increase in complex needs among young adults or a 'thicker soup' effect: the number of complex cases has remained around the same through time, while the wider youth justice population has shrunk around them leaving a consistent core group that now make up a larger proportion of the whole (*ibid*).

A significant group of young adults have transitioned into young adulthood while already in contact with the system, although it is difficult to ascertain the exact percentage (Harris and Edwards, 2023). A 2023 study by the Office for National Statistics identified that more than half of young adults in prison have been in contact with the criminal justice system in childhood (defined by the study as before the age of 16). To fully understand, therefore, who the core group of young adults reaching court now are, and answer the ethnic disparity among them, we need to look earlier.

3 A note on language and the decision to use the term 'minoritised ethnic' can be found in the Appendix.

Complex characteristics and experiences

In 2022, the Office for National Statistics published an article on the background of young adults who had received a custodial sentence by the age of 24. Alongside ethnic disparity, the statisticians found that this cohort of young adults were more likely than not to have been:

- identified with special educational needs (SEN) (this was more than three quarters of the cohort);
- in receipt of free school meals (more than two thirds of the cohort);
- persistently absent from school (just over half the cohort);
- or classed as a child in need by social services (nearly half the cohort).

A follow up article in 2023 revealed that just over half of those 24-year-olds who served an immediate custodial sentence as a young adult (defined by that study as over the age of 16) had previously been convicted or cautioned for an offence before the age of 16.⁴ It also revealed that these young adults were more likely to have attended poorly performing schools and to have grown up in urban areas. It is important to note – as the statisticians do – that, while a large proportion of young adults in contact with the criminal justice system have these characteristics and experiences in common, the majority of the children with these characteristics and experiences do not end up in contact with the criminal justice system at all. That is, they do not even reach the point that would call for diversion.

The characteristics and background circumstances are all listed separately above but, of course, one individual can fit a number of these at the same time. As the phrase complex needs suggests, there is usually more than one factor at play. The combination of characteristics and experiences can also have a cumulative effect.

Beyond the reach of the system

In a review of the youth justice system in 2016, Charlie Taylor argued that “almost all of the causes of childhood offending lie beyond the reach of the youth justice system” (Taylor, 2016). There appears to be consensus across practitioners, academics and the third sector that most of the children and young adults that end up in contact with the criminal justice system have reached that point, in part at least, because of their life experiences prior to getting into trouble, and are better dealt with by agencies other than the justice system.

This is a view that also seems to hold water with the public. Recent polling by Runnymede Trust suggests public support for investing in public and social services to prevent crime. At least half of the respondents thought this would be more effective than increasing police presence or powers (Walcott *et al.*, 2026). Earlier polling by More in Common suggested that the majority of the public believe that better mental health services would relieve pressure on policing and a substantial group believe that investment in opportunities for ‘young people’ (no specific age range given) would divert them from crime (Kimaram *et al.*, 2023).

⁴ Throughout this section the terms children, boys, girls, and young people are used almost interchangeably, in all cases they are used to mean those under 18. The terminology around young people and young adults varies across the agencies that work with them, which is reflective of the confusing nature of where young adults ‘sit’ within the system and all the consequences that come with it. For more on this, please see the Appendix.

These positions tend to approach systemic disadvantages from a criminogenic perspective, focusing on how poverty, SEND, care, or a combination of factors can lead to criminal behaviour. The question is then how to divert those more likely to be charged with offences from criminalisation towards holistic and preventative interventions that are more likely to be effective. The main focus of this report, however, is to consider what drives the disparity in outcomes within the criminal justice system, particularly in relation to ethnicity and gender.

Do multi-agency approaches to diversion decrease ethnic disparity?

Before turning to the criminal justice system as a whole, let us look at the first opportunity within the system to divert an individual away from it. 'Diversion' here refers to a range of interventions that individuals can be referred to before court and, in the youth justice system, before arrest. Data collection on diversion is as varied as the interventions themselves and it follows that there is no consistent data on ethnicity and gender of those diverted. Data specifically on young adult diversion is similarly patchy. We shall instead focus mostly on analyses of diversion in youth justice. In part, this focus will be indicative of concerns affecting young adults given the substantial group that transition into adulthood while still in the system. Also, analyses of multi-agency approaches in the youth justice system allow us to explore the idea that a multi-agency approach to diversion programmes could better address the needs of minoritised groups.

In a working paper on diversion initiatives in the West Midlands (for all ages), Tom McNeil observed that schemes to address low-level drug possession received the highest rate of referrals from police in part because these schemes "represented low-hanging fruit in terms of process and complexity of the individuals' needs" (McNeil, 2025: 5). A Revolving Doors review into potentially effective diversion for young adults found that diversion programmes will be limited in their outcomes if they do not take multiple needs into account (Bennett and Corry-Roake, 2021). As both McNeil and the Revolving Doors review argue, if a drug diversion programme does not address basic needs like food and housing, it will not successfully engage young adults who present with substance use needs as well as these other needs. As the review authors acknowledge, that single-focus particularly disadvantages young women and girls because they are more likely to present with complex needs. A recent study for the Nuffield Foundation found evidence to suggest that youth practitioners on multi-agency panels are more likely to understand and prioritise the specific needs and circumstance of the young people (that is, those under 18) they work with, which could mitigate ethnic and racial disparities caused by distrust in the system or racialised assumptions or misunderstandings of behaviour (Brodie et al., 2025). However, multi-agency working poses challenges too. For example, a Centre for Justice Innovation (CJI) study found that Black, Asian and other minoritised ethnic young people who have developed a distrust of institutions, particularly the police, are likely to distrust the agencies that partner with the police by extension (Ofori et al., 2021). That mistrust is not aided by the use of multi-agency information-sharing by the police for risk managing purposes rather than the purpose of seeking the best route for the young person (Williams, 2018; Morris-Jarra, 2025).

More recently, a 2025 study of youth practitioner perspectives on multi-agency working found that practitioners often see their priorities in conflict with the police, which is complicated by the power dynamics that arise when agencies of different sizes, resources and authority work together (Morris-Jarra, 2025). In this context, even if a

youth practitioner recognises the culturally specific needs that would help divert a young person, they may not always be in the position to successfully convince others in the multi-agency panel.

Disparity in referrals

Data on ethnic disparity in referrals is not conclusive but what there is suggests that Black children and young people (under 18) in particular are not benefiting from them. In some studies the percentage of Black boys (aged 10-17) in informal diversion programmes was greater than the percentage of Black boys in that local area, although the researchers acknowledge this may be because these boys were more likely to come into initial contact with the system (Brodie *et al.*, 2025). In other studies, there were so few Black boys among those in the programme that no definitive trends could be drawn on ethnic disparity (Coulton *et al.*, 2026).

The potential for ethnic and racial disparity in the outcomes of diversion programmes begins with the decisions regarding who is referred to them in the first place. A recent analysis of diversion in London, for example, found that Black children and young people are referred to diversion programmes less often than White children and young people, even when controlling for the seriousness of offending (Rahal *et al.*, 2025).

The CJI study mentioned above found disparate referral decisions were driven both by eligibility criteria and the discretion of decision-makers. Over half the programmes in their analysis required an admission of guilt in order to be referred. This disadvantaged Black, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children and young people, who were less likely to admit guilt due to distrust in the system and were therefore ineligible for diversion programmes that required an admission of guilt (Ofori *et al.*, 2021). However, there were also eligibility requirements that rested less on the decisions of the children and young people and more on the decisions of the multi-agency panel, who made subjective assessments of youths' responsibility-taking and remorse (*ibid.*). This is subjective because the concept of what remorse should look like (tone, facial expression, gesture) can vary across cultural and social backgrounds. If too many panel members only recognise one expression of remorse as genuine, then young people who express remorse in a different way are disadvantaged.

In such a context, behaviour that is just a response to one's traumatic or difficult circumstances, for example, to a young person's experience in care, could be misinterpreted in a way that affects a decision to refer them. This is compounded by racial and ethnic disparity. In the case of care-experience, studies show that Traveller and Black children in care are more likely than their White counterparts to come into contact with the criminal justice system.⁵ Interviews with Black care-experienced young people suggest that drivers for this disparity, and later treatment by the system, include misunderstood behaviour (seen in terms of risk and danger) and poor acknowledgement of vulnerability, because they are seen as being more grown-up than their White counterparts (Barnardo's, 2023). The report highlighted that, for Black girls in particular, this also meant there was an

⁵ In 2016, an independent review for the Prison Reform Trust reported that 44 per cent of looked after children in custody were from a minoritised ethnic background (Laming, 2016). Expanding on this finding, recent research has found that care experienced children from Traveller, Roma, Black and Mixed backgrounds are more likely to have come into contact with the youth justice system than White British care-experienced children (Hunter *et al.*, 2023).

expectation they should “be responsible for avoiding or overcoming violence or trauma, placing the burden on them rather than focusing on prevention or support” (*ibid.*: 16).

This ‘adultification’ of Black children is a recurring theme in explanations for disparity in youth justice. That is, the behaviour of Black children is risk-assessed as if they were older than they are and their level of maturity is not taken into account as much as it would be for a White child of the exact same age and circumstances. It is unclear how adultification directly impacts young adults because developing maturity is not as much of a decisive factor for them in court as it is for children (that is, the stage of maturity of young adults in general is not very regularly taken into account).⁶ However, given the proportion of young adults that first come into contact with the criminal justice system in childhood, the drivers affecting disparity in childhood have knock-on effects into young adulthood.

Disparity in engagement

Even among the young people who are referred to diversion programmes, not all successfully engage with the process to completion. One potential barrier to a young person’s successful completion of a diversion programme is how well that programme is designed to address more than one concern at a time. As mentioned above, young women and girls benefit most from programmes that are designed to address multiple (and thus complex) needs, particularly around mental health. Ministry of Justice statistics from 2017 showed that teenage girls in diversion schemes were nearly three times more likely than teenage boys to be at risk of self-harm (13 per cent and 5 per cent respectively) and twice as likely to have issues with alcohol misuse (18 per cent and 9 per cent respectively) (Ministry of Justice, 2017).

It is difficult to find quantitative analysis on the combination of ethnic and racial disparity and the specific complications affecting young women in diversion. This is partly due to the small numbers of them in the system. The recent comprehensive Nuffield Foundation study exploring racial disparity in diversion from the Youth Justice System could only draw on a handful of interviews and casefiles to report on experiences of girls as the numbers of them were too small to include in any quantitative analysis (Brodie *et al.*, 2025). The report authors note that all the cases they looked at (regardless of the girls’ ethnicity) had similar social and familial issues in common, which could have been addressed by agencies other than police or youth justice (*ibid.*: 82). This is significant because interviews with minoritised ethnic young women about their experiences in the criminal justice system found that criminal justice practitioners often did not understand their family or community dynamics, which had implications for their understanding of the young women’s needs and access to support (Bridge *et al.*, 2022).

Disparity in family and community engagement

Practitioners interviewed for the CJJ study suggested that family and community participation was a key contributor to a successful diversion, framing the barriers to engage minoritised ethnic groups in terms of community while explicitly pointing to families of Traveller children as less likely to engage in the process. That is

⁶ A Howard League report in 2017 found that, in 118 sentence appeals of cases involving young adults, nearly half did not consider age or maturity (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2017). Recent court watch evidence suggests maturity of young adults is also rarely referenced in magistrates’ court (Ratcliffe & Gibbs, 2024).

to say, these preconceptions impact on assessments about the young person's ability to engage with a diversion programme in the first place and could thus impact referral decisions. At the same time, the report authors note that there is no procedure for practitioners to encourage family engagement if they wanted to help get things back on track during the diversion programme (Ofori *et al.*, 2021).

Even if the procedure existed, young adults interviewed by Friends, Families & Travellers (2025) shared that most criminal justice practitioners they met had little awareness of their traditions, community, or approach to family (in which extended family is just as important as the immediate) which could lead to missed opportunities in both early stages of community-based resolutions and later in terms of successful resettlement (Worrall, 2025: 22).

Sometimes the barriers to practitioners' engagement with a young person's family can be shaped by gendered assumptions of family structures. A survey of over 190 child welfare and youth justice workers identified a lack of engagement with Black fathers despite an interest in, and understanding of, the role they play in children's lives (Doherty *et al.*, 2023). Some of the barriers were a combination of procedure, and bias, such as mandatory risk assessments that may frame Black fathers in terms of risk, with no standardised reflective practice to challenge or discuss negative narratives that could contribute to a practitioner's assessment of that risk (*ibid.*). Some of the barriers were a combination of bias and limited resources, such as an inclination to work with mothers as primary caregivers matched with a lack of time to do the extra work required to engage the father also (*ibid.*). What opportunities might be being missed by not considering the role of extended family members, who may have a mentorship role in a young person's life?

Just as there would be benefits from a wider understanding of family structure, so too could there be benefits in understanding the important mentorship and guidance roles played by faith leaders in some communities. In a later section of this report, we will look at evidence regarding the importance of faith, religious identity, and, therefore, religious figures in successful rehabilitation of young adults. Perhaps this positive role of religious institutions and community leaders could be similarly employed at much earlier stages of the system?

In the other direction, the limited focus on family at home can also prevent practitioners from fulfilling safeguarding duties. Practitioners are limited by existing procedures if they identify a risk to a young person's progress originating from outside the home rather than within it. Frameworks for working with children at risk of harm are modelled around safeguarding within the home not beyond it, which can miss criminal exploitation, and it is even more likely to be missed for minoritised ethnic children, particularly Black boys (Firmin *et al.*, 2019). This issue is exacerbated once a young person turns 18 and is automatically reclassified from 'exploited' to 'exploiter' (Harris, 2025).

What meaningful reform would need to address

There is much that those working to reduce ethnic disparity in the young adult justice system can learn from multi-agency approaches to diverting children and young people, both in the successes and the challenges.

There are many child-focused practitioners and a greater push for diversion of children and young people (albeit often with need for admissions of guilt). However, the evidence reviewed here suggests that diversion is structured around an implicit template, of remorse, family support, and coherent engagement, in which those with 'complex needs' appear as exceptions to be managed and minoritised ethnic groups – with different forms of communication and familial (and communal) support structures – are disadvantaged.

Meaningful reform would need to reset the defaults of diversion practice. For example, a multi-agency panel that begins from "who is supporting this child" (with the expectation that the answer might not be a parent) makes different decisions from one that begins from an assumption of coherent family support and treats its absence as a risk factor. Awareness raising around different needs and cultures (and the intersections between them), training, and processes that demand reflection are an important part of this. As O'Neill et al. (2026) recently put it "intersectional practice is not about adding complexity; it is about recognising it."

However, this shift is not achievable through the discretion of individual practitioners alone. The power asymmetry between agencies whose remit is wellbeing and those whose remit is risk, shapes what a multi-agency decision can arrive at, however skilled the individuals in the room.

2 Cumulative effects and multiple opportunities

A finding to explain

Rates of remand and custody have increased for all young adults, but White young adults were remanded or sent to prison at lower rates than any other ethnic group.

In 2012, 41 per cent of White young adults in Crown Court were remanded in custody, rising to 49 per cent in 2024. Meanwhile, the proportion of all other young adults (that is, all ethnicity groups other than White) remanded in Crown Court was already 49 per cent in 2012 (the same proportion as White young adults in 2024) and, by 2024, this had risen to 56 per cent (Tuv, 2025: 13).

In 2010, 24 per cent of White young adults in court for serious offences received a prison sentence, by 2024 this had risen to 28 per cent. Meanwhile, the proportion of Black young adults in court receiving a prison sentence for serious offences was already 29 per cent in 2010 (higher than the percentage for White young adults in 2024) and, by 2024, this had risen to 37 per cent (Tuv, 2025: 13).

In *Smaller, but tougher*, we found several points of ethnic disparity among young adults in court. Following the approach in the 2017 *Lammy Review*, we looked at disproportionality (whether a group made up a greater proportion of those in court compared to their proportion of the general population) and disparity of outcome (such as likelihood of remand and custody). Administrative data sets can only tell us so much. Aside from the limitations around the data itself, we are also not seeing the whole picture if we look at each point in the criminal justice system in isolation. Gathering all the points of ethnic and racial disparity across the system in one place helps put any one singular point in context. It also helps us see how the outcome at one point affects another. To illustrate this, drugs offences provide a useful example.

A series of stages: the drugs offence example

Let us take the policing, charging, prosecution, and sentencing of drugs offences of Black young adults in particular as a way to view the system as a series of stages. Drugs offences provide a good illustration because, at one end, ethnic disparity in custody rates is most pronounced for drugs offences in Crown Court (Pina-Sánchez *et al.*, 2025b) and, at the other, young adults are over-represented in low-level drugs offences, and these 'revolving door' offences are most likely to pull Black young adults into a cycle of crisis and crime (Borysik, 2024).

In relation to policing, young adults are, in general, more likely to be stopped and searched than other ages and Black adults (of all ages) are more likely to be stopped and searched on suspicion of drugs offences than White adults (Shiner *et al.*, 2018). Of those stopped and searched, Black adults and children are less likely to be found in possession of drugs than White adults and children (Eastwood *et al.*, 2013 and Shiner *et al.*, 2018). Despite this, the ethnic disparity in policing contributes to the disproportionate number of Black young adults arrested on suspicion of drugs offences.

There is evidence to suggest that Black adults are less likely to be referred to police-led drug diversion initiatives (Hendrie, 2025) and evidence from London suggests that Black children and young people are less likely to be referred to diversion programmes in general (Rahal *et al.*, 2025).

Black adults are more likely to be charged for drugs offences (Crown Prosecution Service, 2024). These disparities in diversion and charging outcomes for an already disproportionate number of Black young adults arrested on suspicion of drugs offences contributes to an increasingly disproportionate number of Black young adults in court.

If convicted of drugs offences, and with many other case circumstances being equal, Black defendants (again, not age-specific) are more likely to receive a custodial sentence than White defendants at Crown Court (Pina-Sánchez *et al.*, 2025b). It should be noted that later analysis showed ethnic disparity was spread across different offences in magistrates' court (Guilfoyle *et al.*, 2025). Assuming the pattern for young adults follows the general one for all ages, if a disproportionate number of Black young adults are prosecuted for more serious drugs offences at Crown Court, through disparity in sentencing outcomes, that then becomes an even greater disproportionate number of Black young adults in prison.

Even if the disparity at any given stage were small, each one builds upon the other and the disproportionality of Black young adult defendants is therefore greater at the end than it was at the beginning.

Disparity is not just added to at each stage but, in some cases, the outcome of an earlier decision can impact decisions further down the line. Recent research has shown that ethnic disparity at remand and plea stages leads to ethnic disparity in sentencing (Lymeropoulou, 2026). The impact of plea on sentencing disadvantages those groups with less trust in the system but the impact of the plea outcome on sentencing is relatively fixed. The impact of remand on sentencing, however, has far more room for subjective assessment.

The likelihood of receiving a custodial sentence is much higher if one has been remanded, and minoritised ethnic defendants are remanded at much higher rates. This statistical evidence supports the argument that a sentencer could read an earlier remand decision as an indicator of an individual's level of risk and dangerousness in a way the individual cannot counter, because their time in custody has limited their ability to both demonstrate voluntary compliance and access legal advice to prepare a defence (Lymeropoulou, 2026).

Each juncture or decision point in the system has potential to add yet another disparate outcome to a long list of disparate outcomes for a minoritised ethnic young adult (contributing to the growing proportion of minoritised ethnic young adults moving through the system) or to treat them equally at least at the stage they find them. Lymeropoulou's (2026) research suggests that the earlier in the system disparity is addressed the better. The statistical impact of remand decisions on custodial decisions for ethnic minorities suggests that some disparities are being entrenched but it is not inevitable. In a series of interviews with legal professionals, Monteith *et al.* found some examples when judges mitigated, rather than reproduced, racial bias from previous stages of the system just by questioning the police assumptions in court or making clear in court that they found bias in a prosecution counsel's submission (Monteith *et al.*, 2022: 14).

Levels of decision making: returning to the drugs offence example

Institutions in the criminal justice system, much like any institution, are structured by levels of decision-making ability and impact. Decision-making could be crudely grouped into three levels: individual discretion about the outcome for one individual; decision-making around institutional procedures and practices; and policy-making. In reality these levels overlap and do not neatly map on to levels of seniority or influence. To illustrate how these levels of decision-making interact, let us return to the example of drugs offences and look at the decisions to: stop and search; refer to a diversion programme; charge and prosecute; sentence to custody; and facilitate rehabilitation in custody. This is not an exhaustive list of decision-points across the system, but each demonstrates the different possible interactions between decision-making on the ground, decisions about procedure, and decisions around policy.

Stop and search

Returning to stop and search, when a 2013 inspectorate report raised concerns about its overuse due to lack of oversight and too much discretion, the then-Home Secretary Theresa May introduced the Best Use of Stop and Search Scheme (BUSS) to set thresholds and transparency for its use. A report by Stopwatch, Release and LSE in 2018 found that, while the use of stop and search had decreased significantly since the policy intervention, it had fallen most for White individuals, leaving Black and Asian individuals even more disproportionately represented in the figures than they were before (Shiner *et al.*, 2018). The report noted that the vast difference seen in the extent to which stop and search powers are used by different police forces indicates that this use is driven by police policy and decision-making at a police force level.

The relationship between government policy and practice on the ground plays out in unanticipated ways. In an earlier report by Release, the authors argued that the then-government policy focus on criminalisation, led to a policing practice that focused on low-level drugs offences (particularly possession of cannabis) primarily through stop and search. The researchers found that the importance placed on policing even the lowest-level offences combined with the ease in which stop and search could be used to catch such low-level drugs offences made this particular practice a quick way to achieve performance-targets (Eastwood *et al.*, 2013). An institutional performance-review procedure, rather than a shared commitment to tackle drugs offences, shaped how a government policy was implemented.

Even when guidelines are established to mitigate ethnic disparity in stop and search of young adults, they can also distract from intersectional disparity. In a recent systemic analysis of structural racism in the Met, Shereen Daniels argues that legal thresholds and paperwork, if conducted for the sake of procedure rather than the effects they were introduced to address, can prevent accountability for disparity that was not covered by those procedures (Daniels, 2025). In the stop and search example, if the procedures and best practice do not explicitly link with safeguarding policies, minoritised ethnic young women and girls can be disadvantaged. A study of minoritised ethnic young women's experiences of policing found that the lack of safeguarding practices around stop and search left them with no aftercare following strip searches and having to travel home alone late at night due to lack of consideration around the timing of release from police custody (StopWatch, 2025).

Diversion

Referral to diversion programmes, just like stop and search, is led by both discretion and procedure. As mentioned earlier in this report, referral to diversion programmes can rest on eligibility requirements like admission of guilt, which may disadvantage groups with lower trust in the criminal justice system. It can also rely on police discretion regarding the individual's likeliness of successful engagement based on subjective assessments that are open to bias. In their recent study of police-led drug diversion, Stevens *et al.* (2026) found that decisions whether to refer someone to a drug diversion programme can rest with officers on the ground or custody sergeants, while the procedure in some forces could also leave ultimate oversight to middle-management, who could overturn a decision. Evidence also suggests that both development of, and rate of referrals to, these programmes can be led by senior officers and Police and Crime Commissioners (McNeil, 2025; Stevens *et al.*, 2026) or by middle-management such as Chief Inspectors (Stevens *et al.*, 2026). Meanwhile, the diversion programmes can often develop regardless, or in spite of, government-led policy (Stevens *et al.*, 2026).

Charging

The decision to charge an individual for drugs offences, like all charging decisions, requires a prosecutor to apply the full code test – considering the quality of the evidence and the public interest – using their discretion within this. To investigate one of the reasons why Mixed ethnicity individuals were more likely than White individuals to be charged for drugs offences (as well as for burglary and violence against the person), the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) commissioned a linguistic analysis of case files. The analysis revealed that police reports tended to refer to Mixed ethnicity suspects in terms of their actions, which were described in more negative 'prosecution-worthy' terms, while referring to what White suspects had said about their actions, which were described more neutrally (CPS, 2024). The analysis found similar linguistic patterns in consequent CPS documents sent back to the police (*ibid.*).

Prosecutors' decisions to charge are based on certain defined tests, and are thus shaped by 'prosecution-worthy' details in the case files they receive. The CPS report notes that more experienced prosecutors are better at scrutinising the information they receive and this is not just in adherence to the full code test but in the true spirit of it, as it was established by legislators in the 1985 Prosecution of Offences Act. That is, for the CPS to act independently of the police, not adopt their conclusions or assumptions. If more experienced prosecutors are better at scrutinising the case files and interrogating their framing, that is an opportunity, currently unevenly taken, to interrupt the way disparity is carried through the system from policing to charging.

It has also been argued and evidenced that policy arguments have played a role in prosecutorial approaches to liability in multi-defendant cases, which has contributed to the ethnic and racial disparity in the application of these approaches, particularly in prosecutorial narratives about 'gangs' (Williams and Clarke, 2016; Waller, 2024; Tuv *et al.*, 2026). It is worth at least noting here because the connection between these approaches and prosecutorial narratives about 'gangs' intersect both with drugs offences and cases that disproportionately involve

⁷ It is also worth noting here, again, the cliff-edge of support specifically affecting those turning 18 while involved in cases like 'county lines' (both multi-defendant in nature and involving drugs offences) as there is an immediate transition from treatment as 'exploited' to 'exploiter' (Harris, 2025).

young adults.⁷ The CPS has acknowledged concerns that “narratives around ‘gang’ offending may be racially discriminatory” and held a consultation on ‘gang’ related offences guidance last year (CPS, 2026). The evidence from that consultation is now being reviewed.

Sentencing

Once a young adult has been prosecuted and convicted of drugs offences the decision falls to a magistrate or judge to decide their sentence. As mentioned before, disparity in sentencing is not as great as the disparity earlier in the system. This is because there are a number of rules and guidelines that leave less room for discretion. Every offence has a set range of sentencing outcomes and the decision to send the young adult to prison, and for how long, within that range is shaped by a list of possible aggravating and mitigating factors. Some of those factors are straightforward – did the young adult plead guilty or not – and others require subjective assessments around what remorse or good character looks like. Careful statistical analysis has shown that in assault and drugs cases, the mitigation factor of remorse (the most used mitigating factor in drugs offence cases) advantaged White defendants more than any other group (Guilfoyle and Pina-Sánchez, 2025). While mitigating and aggravating factors can affect both custodial sentence and the length of sentence, there is more room for discretion in the former than the latter because sentence-lengths are more fixed. This bears out in statistical studies as well (Lympelopoulou, 2023).

It has been suggested that pre-sentencing reports might go some way in addressing concerns around subjective assessments because they provide more evidence that can broaden the understanding of a defendant’s character and rehabilitative potential. These reports could also highlight vulnerability, developmental needs and wider support needs, which could help mitigate a disadvantage to young adults specifically, as their level of maturity is not often taken into account (T2A, 2026). However, evidence suggests that pre-sentencing reports can contribute to cumulative disparity as much as dissipate it. A study of pre-sentence reports in the youth justice system found a similar linguistic pattern described in police and CPS case files above. That is, White children’s reports tended to include more quotes from the children themselves while Black children’s reports tended to feature more quotes from victims and witnesses (Worsley *et al.*, 2024).

Facilitating rehabilitation in prison

The experiences of young adults in prison shows that sometimes decisions on the ground and procedural levels are impacted not by policy decisions but by the lack of policy at all. In a 2021 thematic report, HM Inspectorate of Prisons found that the lack of a national strategy for young adults led to a concerning haphazard approach to assessing their needs or providing catered programmes for their rehabilitation. The report added that “poor provision for young adults disproportionately affected prisoners from black and minority ethnic backgrounds, who were particularly overrepresented in the young adult population” (HMIP, 2021).

Individual discretion of staff at all levels, and how this impacts their interaction with those in prison, can also make a big difference to how an individual in custody progresses. In interviews with Jason Warr, Black men serving long sentences expressed that they had to perform a kind of ‘whiteness’ in the way they spoke and behaved in order to

“mitigate their perceived risk and navigate the prison’s pathways to release” (Warr, 2023). Similarly, in interviews with Black women in prison, Angela Charles found that these women could not communicate with prison officers as easily as White women because they felt that they were viewed with more suspicion, which in turn meant they had less access to information about the status of their application to be released on temporary licence or why it might be denied (Charles, 2022: 214). Both these studies did not specifically focus on young adults so one cannot draw any conclusions specifically about young adults from them, but it is worth asking how the risk assessments around young adult behaviour might intersect with already heightened racialised conceptions of risk.

Given that the ways in which people are treated by staff has an impact in how they engage with the system, it is concerning that there is evidence of ethnic disparity in the use of PAVA spray (Prison Reform Trust, 2023) and disciplinary hearings (Maslaha, 2026), particularly for Black and Muslim young men. In 2014, The Young Review, highlighted how such disparity in treatment (and provision of catered services) were impacting the successful rehabilitation and resettlement of Black and Muslim young men (Mullen, 2014). A recent analysis found that there has been little progress since the Young Review due to a combination of: a lack of sustained political will (and consequent inadequate funding allocation); institutional inertia; and limited availability of independent providers that address the specific needs of Black and Muslim men in prison (Action for Race Equality and Clinks, 2025).

Within this context it is important that staff in prison have some level of cultural awareness and connection with minoritised ethnic young adults, or work with external consultancies that can. Evidence gathered by the Irish Chaplaincy in Britain (ICB) in 2011, for example, indicates that prison chaplains, particularly Catholic chaplains, play an important role for Irish travellers because of the respect and trust the chaplains command and the help they could provide (often beyond their remit) because of their cultural understanding (MacGabhann, 2011). Recent studies from the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) alliance have shown that programmes which build on the important role of community and faith could create opportunities for successful rehabilitation of young adult Travellers (Worrall, 2025) and Muslims (Rahman and Miah, 2023). So too can a focus on the importance of family and identity in prison improve the wellbeing and rehabilitation of Black young men (Spark Inside, 2023).

Maintaining family connections in prison is important for wellbeing, rehabilitation, and later settlement. It is concerning, then, that this is even more challenging for young women, who are more likely to be placed farther from family due to the smaller number of women’s prisons. In her research on Black women in prison (not specifically young adults), Charles found that Black women are more likely than White women to be placed far away from family, receiving fewer visits, and practical alternatives were often not sought (Charles, 2022).

Recognition and understanding of different support systems and family structures can be on a practitioner’s value judgment, influencing their individual interaction with minoritised ethnic young adults in prison. If that practitioner also has the seniority to bring in one of the programmes mentioned by the T2A reports above, then that recognition and understanding can also make a difference to how the institution deals with many individuals. As the 2025 Action for Race Equality and Clinks analysis points out, though, this must be accompanied by the funding allocation to run such programmes and that requires political will.

Multiple opportunities

In 2012, the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A) published a report outlining 10 points across the criminal justice system at which young adults could be successfully diverted from crime. That is, the system can be seen as a pathway, where each point provides an opportunity to keep a young adult on that path that eventually takes them out of the system for good. As we have shown in this section, decision-makers at every point have the chance to take up these opportunities or replicate the poor outcomes from the point before.

Each discretionary decision could add to the cumulative disparity impacting a young person as they are processed across the system or serve as the opportunity to address them equally. While each discretionary decision on the ground can be enabled or limited by institutional practices and procedures (that are themselves a response to policy), decision-makers at more senior levels can change those practices and procedures so they address the needs of a broader population.

The need for broader standard practices is clear when one listens to the experiences of young adults whose needs are not currently met by existing ones. In a collection of interviews by Leaders Unlocked, for example, minoritised ethnic young adults who have been through the criminal justice system expressed their concerns that their backgrounds and needs were not understood by decision-makers who rarely reflected their communities (Leaders Unlocked, 2020: 9).⁸

Reflecting on five years of the Police Race Action Plan, the Independent Scrutiny and Oversight Board found that, while “racism within policing is structural and systemic, not simply the product of individual prejudice”, positive actions by some individuals, particularly senior leaders, can genuinely drive change across whole departments and the institution (ISOB, 2026: 8). We can expand on this principal. While no one individual is responsible for disparity across the entire justice system, let alone the drivers outside of it (like deprivation and unaddressed mental health concerns), we have illustrated above how everyone has the opportunity to address disparity within their sphere of influence and in the decisions that they are responsible for. Crucially, change only occurs if all practitioners and decision-makers play their part, it cannot solely be driven by policy, procedure or individual discretion alone.

8 In the 2021 census, about 82 per cent of the population identified as White. 75 per cent of Ministry of Justice staff identified as White but this average is somewhat skewed by admin and ancillary staff, for more senior staff this was closer to 80 per cent (Ministry of Justice, 2025b). Across the rest of the criminal justice system the percentage of practitioners that identified as White (of those that responded) in 2024 ranged from 77 per cent in the Crown Prosecution Service (although this was 90 per cent for senior staff) to 92 per cent in the Police (*ibid.*).

What meaningful reform would need to address

The drugs offence example, which is particularly relevant for an analysis of young adults, illustrates a system in which no single stage produces the aggregate pattern of disparity, and each stage can be defended on its own terms. This is what makes cumulative disparity so difficult to address; institutional reforms are typically measured against the gateway the institution controls, not against the downstream trajectory a decision at that gateway helps to produce.

Meaningful engagement with cumulative disparity has to be cross-institutional. It requires a shared measure of success across the stages, one that treats a decision at any given point as also a decision about what happens at the next. Without that, individual institutions can each demonstrate progress while the aggregate pattern remains unchanged.

This is not a call for a new institution to preside over the others. It is a call for the existing ones to be accountable for cumulative outcomes, not only for the discrete decisions they make within their own remit.

3 The decline in ethnicity data collection and why it matters

A finding to explain

In 2010, seven per cent of young adults (aged 18-24) in court for serious offences had their ethnicity recorded as 'unknown'. By 2024, the percentage of 'unknowns' had risen to 37 per cent (Tuv, 2025).

The last 15 years have seen a substantial increase in missing or 'unknown' ethnicity data across the criminal justice system (with the exception of prisons). The increasingly poor quality of ethnicity data is a well-known concern in the sector and has been raised in inspectorate reports. The issue was also the subject of public debate last year, after it was highlighted in Baroness Casey's audit on group-based child sexual exploitation and abuse. Casey's recommendation to improve the standard of ethnicity data most recently appeared in the government's white paper on police reform.

Why has ethnicity data collection declined? And why is this data needed anyway? Or rather, how can this data best be used to address ethnic disparity?

Why is the data missing?

Working on the assumption that most of the ethnicity data in the courts (which was our focus) is informed by data collected by the police, let us first look to explanations for the lack of ethnicity recording there.

A 2023 report by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services (HMICFRS) found several reasons why ethnicity data was not being recorded. These could be summarised in three overarching themes: procedural barriers; sensitivity around the topic of ethnicity; and lack of understanding about why the data is needed.

Procedural barriers

One barrier to the collection of ethnicity data is the way it is expected to be collected. Police officers can forget the task in busy custody suites and it would not be appropriate while managing violent situations. In the prison context, where the timelines are longer, ethnicity data is far more complete, which suggests that data collection in the policing context may well be impacted by the comparatively shorter timelines of busy custody suites or within the time in which an officer was in contact with a suspect. Busy and stressful situations require prioritisation and recording ethnicity was often missed. This may have been exacerbated in the 2010s when resources were more stretched. One procedural recommendation suggested by the inspectorate was to simply add a mandatory ethnicity field to every database used by police forces.

The inspectorate report also notes that there could be a greater role for local Criminal Justice Boards in monitoring local ethnicity data and holding agencies to account if that data is not being collected as well as challenging police about ethnic disparity in that data. The forthcoming restructure of local policing oversight, as set out in the recent police reform white paper, is an opportunity for Criminal Justice Boards to take on this role.

Sensitive and complex categories: ethnicity is not straightforward

The sensitivity around recording ethnicity applies both to the discomfort officers might feel asking people for their self-defined ethnicity (or judging the ethnicity themselves) and people's reluctance to give their ethnicity to the police.⁹ Ethnicity categories and people's responses to them are not straightforward in a number of ways.

Over the course of the 15 years of data we looked at, the census updated its ethnicity categories in response to increasing reflection from the public that certain groups did not see themselves in the existing categories.¹⁰ This is one reason an individual may decline to engage with ethnicity questions.

By comparing responses to questions about ethnicity and regional origin in the Crime Survey for England and Wales, Manzur *et al.* (2024) found that respondents from the global East, South East, and Central (ESEC), the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) and Latin America were more diverse in their ethnicity categorisations than other regions and were more likely to categorise their ethnicity as 'Other'. Manzur *et al.* argue that the experiences of these groups are being missed because they are lost within these larger varied categories. One could also conclude, perhaps, that this variety (and higher rate of 'Other' responses) indicate that a substantial (and increasing) group of people find ethnicity categories do not represent them. News coverage of bemused responses to the growing numbers of 'Mixed' category responses in the census (Booth and Goodier, 2022), also support this conclusion.

Completing the census and responding to an interviewer for the Crime Survey are both obviously very different contexts to answering a police officer upon or after arrest, but those results are still indicative of another potential factor at play. If an individual does not feel that the available categories make any sense to them, it could be that they are less likely to engage with the question. So, if there is a concern about stigmatisation that might occur once one 'reveals' an ethnicity that might be otherwise hidden — as has historically been the case for Traveller communities (Worrall, 2025) — that reluctance is understandably compounded.

Albeit in another context, research into ethnicity data collection in the health care sector found that some of the most common reasons for resistance to answering ethnicity questions were that people did not identify with the categories and they were concerned about misuse of the data (Butt and Cooper Stubbs, 2025). To address these concerns, the study suggested that frontline workers could be better trained and supported to ask about ethnicity in a respectful way and explain what the data is for. As was outlined in the previous section, in the context of policing and criminal justice, more than this will be needed to build trust. We need only look, again, to the

⁹ It is important to reflect on the fact that both officer-recorded and self-identified ethnicity is collected. Comparing the two provides opportunities both to fill data gaps and investigate the role of perceptions on outcomes. That is, if an officer treats a person in a particular way based on racialised assumptions then it matters what ethnicity they recorded, particularly if that ethnicity was different to the ethnicity the person self-identified as. Currently, stop and search data published by the Home Office, includes both but it would be interesting to see this in other published datasets.

¹⁰ Even when categories are added, it may not always be clear in a police custody or prison setting that these categories are an option. In 2025, the ethnicity option 'Roma' was added to the prison database but it is not yet clear how much awareness there is among staff, or those serving a sentence, that the option is there (Preston, 2025).

concerns around information-sharing arrangements in multi-agency efforts to support young people (Williams, 2018; Morris-Jarra, 2025).

What is the data for?

One potential reason for the more complete ethnicity data in 2010 (the start of the data set we looked at), was the recent implementation of the Equality Act 2010, which brought in the Public Sector Equality Duty. This would have been accompanied by public and institutional information drives about protected characteristics and importance of tracking outcomes for them. The 2023 HMICFRS report suggests that these efforts to ensure that all staff understand the importance of collecting ethnicity data was not sustained or refreshed in subsequent years. The officers might not appreciate the importance of collecting the data and what it is used for so it seems like unnecessary bureaucracy.

Perhaps the real question here is not so much where the data went, but what it is for? Moreover, how can the collection of administrative data address systemic disparities in outcomes for minoritised ethnic young adults?

Explaining the data

In 2017, the *Lammy Review* recommended that the criminal justice system, when faced with ethnic disparity in its data, should seek to explain that data and, if the disparity can be explained by causes within the system's control, reform its practices. As noted in *Smaller but tougher*, there are limitations to the conclusions one can draw from aggregate administrative data, like quarterly criminal justice statistics. These court outcomes are just a snapshot at a point of time, it does not provide enough information to work out how that point in time was reached. Any calculations about disproportionality that simply compare the percentage of an ethnic group in court to the percentage of that ethnic group in the general population may well indicate something, but also misses all the steps that led to that point. Presenting that data without an attempt to explain the intervening points leaves a dangerous gap, one that can be filled by conjecture, including about criminality and ethnicity.

The other reason aggregate administrative data needs explanation is, as Shereen Daniels points out, that it helps establish accountability. When releasing data is treated as the limit of an institutions' responsibility, it becomes a barrier to reform because the institution considers the publication itself to be sufficient (Daniels, 2025: 51). That is, if not used to investigate why something is happening, and address identified issues, the collection and presentation of ethnicity statistics will simply sustain the system as it is. This report has taken three different approaches to explaining the data analysed in *Smaller, but tougher*: drawing on in-depth statistical studies that pinpoint specific factors impacting outcomes at one decision point; taking a cumulative view that draws connections between multiple decision points; and referencing qualitative data that explains the reasons behind statistical connections.

Pinpointing specific causes at specific moments

In a recent comparative analysis of sentencing in magistrates' courts and Crown Court, Guilfoyle *et al.* (2025) conclude that it is important to ascertain exactly in what circumstances and how disparity occurs in order to address it. Their analysis found that, while ethnic disparity in sentence outcomes appeared concentrated in drugs offences in Crown Court, it occurred across a number of offences in the magistrates' courts. They also found a variability in the extent of ethnic disparity across court locations. These differences between the courts, Guilfoyle *et al.*, suggest would mean that interventions must be both offence-specific and court-specific.

In order to achieve such specificity, it is necessary to control for as many other factors as possible. That control might sometimes extend to include factors which are themselves a driver of disparity, but at an earlier point in the system. Plea decisions are a good example because, as highlighted in the *Lammy Review*, minoritised ethnic groups are less likely to plead guilty, due to lack of trust in the system and access to legal advice, which then affects their sentencing outcomes.

Connecting data

As described in the previous section, recent statistical research has shown that ethnic disparity in remand decisions contributed to ethnic disparity at sentencing (Lymperopoulou, 2026). That analysis was possible because the courts have linked data-sets that allow statisticians, through the Administrative Data Research (ADR) UK initiative, to track an individual's outcomes from first hearing at the magistrates' court through to their sentence. This ability to track the cumulative effect is limited because not all the data sets across the criminal justice system connect.

While it is understandable that institutional policy on data-gathering on protected characteristics would take the legislation as its starting point, and it proved a powerful starting point at least in 2010, basing a data approach solely on the categories of the Act can limit analysis. Class or socio-economic background is not a protected characteristic but statistical research has shown that area deprivation (as a proxy for class) has an impact on sentencing outcomes (Veiga *et al.*, 2022; Pina-Sánchez *et al.*, 2025b). Even when institutions collect and publish data on protected characteristics the groupings might not be helpful. Age is a protected characteristic, but it is difficult to tell anything about young adults specifically in the published prison population tables because these only include the category 18-20, leaving all adults 21 and over in one group.

Some institutions publish data in which gender, age, and ethnicity are aggregated separately, which makes it difficult to track the intersection between them. Here, again, using the Equality Act as the basis for the kinds of data to track is unhelpful because the protected characteristics are all presented as independent rather than potentially overlapping (O'Neill, 2026). Efforts to measure the outcomes across such intersections can also be complicated by small sample sizes and the crossover between categories, although there have been interesting developments in using different statistical models to achieve this (see, for example, Pina-Sánchez and Tura, 2024).

One way of explaining statistical disparities at particular points, and drawing connections between them, is by contextualising these trends with qualitative data. Qualitative data provides insights into how and why decision makers may make their decisions, whether by revealing assumptions they may hold or outlining the way discretion is guided or limited by procedure, established practices, and – more diffusely – policy.

Crucially though, qualitative data also provides the ‘why’ – in the sense of why it is important – by highlighting the experiences of those who have faced the consequences of those decisions and procedures. This is all the more important when trying to capture what happens to groups so small in number that they are lost in aggregate statistics. Even if a statistical model could be applied to identify intersectional effects, groups like minoritised ethnic young women have distinct experiences that might get lost in attempts to explain broader trends in ethnic disparity. This report, therefore, has drawn on qualitative data to help fill the gap in explaining the specific issues affecting these young women throughout.

What meaningful reform would need to address

The decline in ethnicity recording reflects a set of barriers to collection that are procedural, cultural, and connected to a poor understanding of why the data is needed. Complete data would not, by itself, address disparity. But its absence forecloses the possibility of doing so. What cannot be seen cannot be explained, and what cannot be explained cannot be corrected.

Meaningful reform would need to reconnect collection to purpose. That means treating ethnicity data not as an administrative field to be filled but as an accountability instrument, which is collected because someone is required to act on what it shows. Mandating fields in databases without that link produces better compliance but no change in outcomes.

The recent police reform white paper and the forthcoming restructure of local criminal justice oversight are moments at which this link could be built: between the point of collection, the analysis of what the data reveals, and a body with the standing to act on it.

4 Why are young women still remanded in non-custodial cases?

A finding to explain

Between 2012 and 2024, on average, only 56 per cent of young women (aged 18-24) remanded in custody at Crown Court were given a prison sentence, while, on average, 75 per cent of young men (aged 18-24) remanded in custody at Crown Court went on to receive a prison sentence (Tuv, 2025: 9).¹¹

Smaller, but tougher found young women were more likely than young men to be remanded in cases that did not lead to custodial sentences. Concerns about remands of women were raised in the Corston Report in 2007. Most recently, the Women's Justice Board Report (2026) stressed that young women are particularly prone to being remanded and recommended that this group need a tailored approach. Just over half of the young women (aged 18 to 20) in prison between March 2025 and March 2026 were there on remand (Ministry of Justice, 2026). Why is this the case and why have legislative changes and statutory reviews seemingly not affected the trend?

Use of remand to address complex needs

Aside from defendants with criminal records, defendants with no fixed abode, drug addiction, and mental health concerns are those most likely to be remanded, according to a 2018 study based on lawyers' survey responses (Gibbs, 2018). More recently, a 2023 study of over 700 magistrates court hearings suggested that the use of remand to address social issues, which would be more effectively addressed by other services, had an impact on remand rates, particularly for those in court for less serious offences (Snell, 2023). Even when alternative services are available to address accommodation, substance misuse, and mental health needs, these may take longer to organise than the time taken to reach a remand hearing. In addition, these issues affect the most vulnerable people, and the process is made even more confounding for them by the lack of information about the bail application process or why remand decisions are made. This is a particular concern for young adults. While under 18s have a youth offending team worker responsible for putting together a bail package, there is no equivalent support for young adults, who report finding the legal process around bail application confusing (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2023: 6).

Defendants with no fixed address can be remanded if the court is concerned that they may then fail to appear in court (or surrender to custody). This use of remand impacts some groups more than others. Young adults interviewed by Friends, Families & Travellers considered that they were more likely to be remanded because of an assumption that they were a flight risk (Worrall, 2025: 22). A scoping study of young adult remands in 2021 suggested that young adults in general are more likely to be remanded due to concerns about unsuitable alternative accommodation, particularly if they are care leavers (Allen, 2021: 27). As also noted by the scoping study, the amount of bail accommodation is already limited (Allen, 2021), and given that provision for women in

¹¹ These figures were calculated from quarterly criminal justice statistics up to end of December 2024. The data release for statistics up end of December 2025 (Ministry of Justice, 2026b) included updated numbers from previous years, which bring these averages up to 60 per cent and 77 per cent respectively.

the system in general is smaller, one can see how it may be difficult to provide young women appropriate accommodation. So some young women may be remanded because appropriate alternative accommodation could not be found for them. This issue is particularly acute for young women who turn 18 while in contact with the criminal justice system, or are in care, because they suddenly lose access to services and support as they enter young adulthood (Harris *et al.*, 2021).

In 2012, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act (LASPO) introduced an amendment to the Bail Act that limits the court's ability to deny bail on grounds the defendant may fail to appear in court (or surrender to custody) if there is no real prospect of a custodial sentence (sometimes referred to as the 'no real prospect' test). This limitation also applies to considerations about defendants committing another offence or interfering with witnesses but crucially does not apply to remand decisions based on the defendant's 'own protection'. Sometimes the lack of appropriate accommodation may be considered in deciding what would be best for a defendant's 'own protection', so too could remand be considered to address substance misuse or mental health concerns (Howard League for Penal Reform, 2020).

In 2023, an Independent Monitoring Board (IMB) report found that an increasing number of women with severe mental health conditions were being remanded for their 'own protection'. Use of remand for one's own protection on mental health grounds particularly impacts young women, who are more likely to present with mental health concerns than young men in the criminal justice system (Bridge *et al.*, 2022). As several reports have highlighted, there is a dearth of services to address the specific needs of young women, especially those from minoritised ethnic groups (*ibid.*) so it follows that they are more at risk of being remanded for their own protection for this reason.

Disparity in remand and cumulative effects

Smaller, but tougher found that over a 15-year period, only 56 per cent of young women remanded at Crown Court ended up with an immediate prison sentence. On closer look, however, that average percentage might be true of White young women (1,829 White young women sent to prison out of 3,271 remanded at Crown Court), but not so much for Black young women, 62 per cent of whom were sent to prison after having been remanded (253 Black young women sent to prison out of 405 remanded at Crown Court).¹² That is, it appears that Black young women were more likely to end up with a prison sentence after being remanded than White young women.

Aggregate data can only tell us so much and, as noted in *Smaller, but tougher*, the relatively small population of young women makes it difficult to draw out any clear trends from gender and ethnicity data together, so we did not pursue it in great detail. However, Kitty Lymperopoulou's recent statistical analysis of remand outcomes by gender and ethnicity shows how important it is to look at both because ethnic disparity does not necessarily present in the same way for women and men. For example, Lymperopoulou found that Asian men are less likely to

¹²These figures were calculated from quarterly criminal justice statistics up to end of December 2024. The data release for statistics up to end of December 2025 (Ministry of Justice, 2026b) included updated numbers from previous years, which bring these averages up to 60 per cent and 66 per cent respectively.

be remanded than White men, but Asian women are more likely to be remanded than White women (Lymeropoulou, 2025). It is especially important to consider how the intersection of gender and ethnicity might change the way in which remand outcomes affect sentencing outcomes.

As mentioned earlier in this report, through statistical analysis of court data, Lymeropoulou found that remand outcomes impact sentencing outcomes. However, this does not play out the same for men and women. Remand decisions for men make them nine times more likely to be sent to prison but this is seven times for women (Lymeropoulou, 2025). At the same time, Lymeropoulou also found that ethnic disparity in sentencing was more pronounced for men than women, which could indicate that some of the disadvantages experienced by women from minoritised ethnic backgrounds earlier in the process, are not carried through to sentencing in the same way as they are for men (*ibid.*). On this reading, remand outcomes affect judges' custodial decisions for men through concerns about dangerousness (with remand being seen as an indicator of this), but women's custodial outcomes are not affected in the same way because the decision to remand women is more often driven by concerns for their 'own protection', which a sentencing judge is likely to discount at sentencing. This explanation would fit alongside a body of literature that suggests women's sentencing outcomes are more lenient because judges are more likely to see women as less culpable or more in need of help (the 'chivalry' perspective) (see Bontrager *et al.*, 2013).

However, Lymeropoulou's analysis finds that Black women are more likely than any other group of women to receive custodial sentences (Lymeropoulou, 2025), which suggests that something in Black women's remand outcomes is influencing their sentencing outcomes in a way closer to the pattern for men. Or rather, the generally higher leniency in women's sentencing does not play out equally by ethnicity because Black women may be viewed as higher risk or more dangerous than other minoritised ethnic women. This would follow patterns in disparities found between minoritised ethnic groups as noted in Lymeropoulou's more recent paper, in particular the cumulative effect of Black individuals being more likely to be viewed as suspicious and dangerous from the very earliest stages of the criminal justice system (Lymeropoulou, 2026).

Qualitative research and interviews with Black young women and girls find that they are often assessed as less vulnerable, with their behaviour misinterpreted as a form of aggression rather than expression of distress, leading to harsher treatment (see, for example, Harris *et al.*, 2021: 17; Barnardo's, 2023; and StopWatch, 2025). One might conclude that Black young women are therefore more likely than other young women to be remanded in relation to assessments about risk rather than for their own protection. This is worth bearing in mind as measures aimed at reducing the potential misuse of remand for young women might fail Black young women if they are too focused on the use of remand for defendants' 'own protection'.

The need for better data to explain and reform the use of remand

Since at least the 2007 *Corston Report*, there has been an awareness in the sector that women of all ages have too often been remanded in cases that do not lead to custody. Despite this awareness, and the introduction of the 'no real prospect' test by the LASPO Act in 2012, this trend in remands of women has not really changed (Delap and

Hogarth, 2025). New legislation could make an impact. The Sentencing Act 2026 strengthened the ‘no real prospect’ test to specify that use of remand should be limited if there is no real prospect of immediate custody, suggesting presumption of bail to those potentially facing suspended sentences too. The 2026 Sentencing Act also formalised the duty of the court to consider a woman’s pregnancy status or caring role as reasons for granting bail, which would potentially impact the numbers of young women remanded. Although not yet in force, the Mental Health Act 2025 also added an amendment to ensure that an individual cannot be remanded for their own protection solely on mental health grounds. As argued above, young women are more likely than young men and older women to be remanded under these considerations so the legislation could impact the numbers of young women remanded. Although, as argued above, there may be ethnic disparity in these reductions.

While it would be possible to indirectly view the effects the ‘no real prospect’ test may or may not have by tracking the number and proportion of remands, it would be difficult to ascertain the exact extent to which young women are remanded for their ‘own protection’ and in what circumstances, because reasons for remand are not published. In many cases the reasons are not fully explained at the hearings themselves, at least not with reference to the Bail Act.¹³

Establishing a statutory duty to record data does not necessarily lead to a public dataset open to scrutiny. In 2022, the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts (PCSC) Act introduced an amendment to the LASPO Act to introduce the duty of courts to explain to children in ordinary language why they have decided to remand them to youth detention accommodation as well as providing these reasons in writing. Since this amendment was enacted there has been no sign of published datasets, partly because the data is not collected in an easily shareable way.

In response to a 2023 Justice Committee recommendation to record the use of remand reasons (in particular data on the use of remand for individuals’ ‘own protection’), the government left open a possibility for future data after the roll out of the Common Platform (a shared digital case management system for court staff, lawyers, CPS, and judiciary) (House of Commons Justice Committee, 2023). The Common Platform has, however, not rolled out as far as originally planned (Crown Court still uses an older system) and has taken longer than anticipated (Rowland, 2025; Goodwin, 2026).

If a data set of remand decisions were made publicly available, analysis of that data could be used to assess whether the legislative changes are filtering through to remand decisions in practice. The next question would be, if that analysis were to find that the legislation has not had its intended effect, how would that be addressed and by whom? It has been well argued that remand decisions are overlooked in oversight frameworks and are difficult to challenge (Gibbs, 2018). This is concerning given the proven consequences remand has for future outcomes in the criminal justice system, the growing proportion of young adults remanded at court, and the ethnic disparity within remand outcomes.

¹³In 585 observed remand hearings, in which decisions were presented, decision-makers made no reference to the Bail Act in 37.8 per cent of the cases, referred at least to a test of ‘reasonableness’ or ‘proportionality’ in 9.9 per cent, and made no reference to any test of any kind in 48.4 per cent, that is nearly half the cases (Snell, 2023).

What meaningful reform would need to address

Numerous reviews and reports have highlighted the inappropriate use of remand for young women on the grounds that it is for their 'own protection', and that young women are particularly prone to this use of remand. Despite the awareness, and some legislative changes, the trend has remained mostly unchanged over nearly two decades. Alongside this trend, statistical evidence shows that remand outcomes have greater effects on sentencing outcomes for women when they are more likely to be viewed in terms of risk or dangerousness than vulnerability and this affects Black women in particular.

Recent legislative changes have the potential to address the inappropriate use of remand for young women. However, legislative changes on their own will not change this use of remand automatically and may not benefit women of all ethnicities equally.

The evidence reviewed here points to two conditions that would need to hold together. The first is alternative provision for the underlying needs, accommodation, mental health, substance use, that remand is currently being used to address in the absence of anything else. Without this, the incentives on decision-makers do not change.

The second is documentation, standardised, accessible written records of the reasons for remand decisions. Without these, neither legislative changes nor training can be shown to be filtering through to practice, and disparities in how risk and vulnerability are attributed cannot be scrutinised.

These two conditions are related. Alternative provision changes what a sentencer can do, recorded reasons change what a sentencer can be held to. Neither alone has shifted the pattern.

Conclusion

This report set out to explain the drivers of ethnic disparity in the young adult criminal justice data over the last 15 years, without marginalising the experiences of young women along the way. In one way, the answer could be summarised in a paragraph. The criminal justice system is a complex one, made up of institutions with overlapping responsibilities and governance structures, overseen by more than one ministry. In such a system, a one-size-fits-all approach is the path of least resistance for decision-makers at any level of seniority. The research indicates that a one-size-fits-all approach does not address the needs and behaviours of young adults, minoritised ethnic groups, women, and the intersection of all three. When the majority of the decision-makers across the system come from similar backgrounds, their decisions can be shaped by biases that are, at best, ethnocentric (assuming universal norms based on what is normal for them) and, at worst, prejudiced.

The findings of this briefing point to a system in which disparity is not incidental but produced. It is produced by the accumulation of decisions taken at successive stages, by the institutional cultures and procedures that shape how discretion is exercised, and by the absence of the data infrastructure needed to see, explain, or correct what is happening.

The issues identified here are far from new. They have been the subject of successive government reviews, from Corston in 2007, through Lammy in 2017 to this year's Women's Justice Board report. What this report has tried to identify, is the analytical account of how disparity is actually produced, and the accountability and infrastructure that would make change stick.

Given the cumulative nature of the pattern and the length of time it has been established, identifying meaningful next steps is a necessary but far from straightforward task. Reforms directed at improving the individual operation of a system that is producing this pattern can, without meaning to, entrench the pattern they set out to correct. That is not an argument against reform, but a reason to be careful about which reforms are pursued and to what end. Without concrete next steps, ways forward will not be found, but next steps that treat improvements in accountability as the endpoint risk supporting the status quo.

Two considerations should guide the work that follows.

- The first concerns who acts. While no single decision-maker is responsible for all the circumstances that came before them, all decision-makers, at all levels of seniority, in all criminal justice institutions, have opportunities within their sphere of influence to interrupt the cumulative production of disparity.
- The second concerns what interruption means. Addressing the patterns identified here is not a matter of treating people differently because of their protected characteristics. It is a matter of ensuring that people are not being treated differently on the basis of their protected characteristic, because assumptions underlying certain practices and decisions disadvantage them, whether indirectly or by design.

Change will not be delivered from analytical work alone, but it does depend on a public and political debate willing to work from the evidence rather than around it. That debate currently tends to attract more heat than light. This report is intended as a foundation for that important ongoing work, not a substitute for it.

Appendix: A note on language

Ethnic categories and minoritised ethnicities

When addressing racial and ethnic disparity there is always a potential danger of reifying race and ethnicity, as if these are real innate properties rather than an indicator of how people are seen and treated. Recently, in a working paper for the Centre, Jason Warr argued that fear of this reification has caused some criminologists to avoid the issue of racism altogether or use unclear language to discuss it (Warr, 2026). With this in mind, this report will use capitalised terms to refer to ethnic categories to acknowledge that words like Black or White are not adjectives. They are not describing the person. Rather, these are monikers for constructed categories used in official statistics, which is the data used in this and the last report to analyse trends, and, frankly, the best we have to work with at the moment. We need these categories to track how the perception of people's ethnicity might affect decisions and outcomes (the aim of this report).

When not referring to a particular ethnic category but a group, *Smaller, but tougher* used the term 'ethnic minority' as a shorthand to explain static datapoints. However, as this report explores the ways in which some ethnic groups are disadvantaged because they do not fit a conceptualised 'majority' norm, as well as racialised assumptions about their behaviour, it is more appropriate here to use 'minoritised' to indicate that people are made into minorities rather than simply being a minority in terms of their population size in England and Wales.

The term 'ethnicity' is used more often than 'race' in this report to reflect the official statistics that the report is attempting to explain and the general use of the word to refer to cultural, social and linguistic practices. This report explores the disadvantages that come from narrow processes that do not account for other forms of communication and family support (ethnocentrism) as well as racialised assumptions (and the ways in which the two combine).

Young adults, young people, and children

As discussed in this report, part of the unique challenges facing those aged 18 and over, but under 25, is the inconsistency of different agencies' approaches to age grouping. For example, the National Police Chiefs' Council (NPCC) charter on policing Children and Young Persons (CYP) defines Children as under 18 and Young Persons as between 18-24 years old. However, the NPCC strategic vision document on Out of Court Disposals (OoCD) states that, while OoCD for Children are in their CYP Portfolio, the OoCD for Young Persons sits within the NPCC's OoCD portfolio.

Youth offending teams work with children under 18, but some of the literature on this work refers to both children and young people. Some youth practitioners work with young adults, defined as 18-21 year olds (although sometimes this also included up to 25). Similarly, if you were to filter one of the Ministry of Justice's quarterly court statistics pivot tables by the age group category "young adult", it would show you only those aged 18-20. The same is true of published prison population data.

All this inconsistency feeds through into terminology in documents within and beyond the various institutions and agencies that work with children, young people, and/or young adults. In an attempt at clarity, in this report the terms young adult, young women and young men should be taken to mean those aged between 18 and 24, unless otherwise indicated. The terms children and young people, boys, and girls are used to refer to under 18s, unless otherwise stated.

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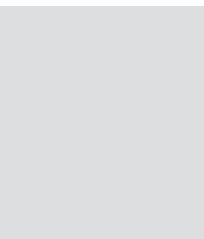
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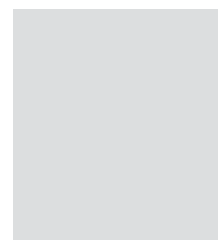
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Transition to Adulthood (T2A) is a Barrow Cadbury Trust criminal justice programme building the case for a distinct approach to policy and practice relating to young adults in the criminal justice system.

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