

Snapshot on Young Adults and the Criminal Justice System

Lost in Transition

Young adults aged between 18 and 24 are responsible for up to an estimated third of crime in Britain costing between £16 800 million and £20 000 million each year¹. Last year the Barrow Cadbury Trust published its Commission on Young Adults and the Criminal Justice System. Their report, *Lost in Transition*², argued that imprisoning young adult prisoners, for all but the most serious offences, is counterproductive and leads to more crime – with over eighty per cent reconvicted after leaving prison.

In 2005 the Labour manifesto gave a commitment to “overhaul our youth justice system” and promised “more use of intensive community programmes”. The focus was to be concentrated on those “most at risk of offending”. But so far, in the face of media storms over short sentencing, few of these measures have been implemented. More 18-24 year olds are being locked up than ever before.

There are very few public services that address the needs of young adults – particularly those in their “invisible early twenties”. Many policies assume that youth ends at the age of eighteen, even though it is obvious that very few young adults are fully mature and financially independent at this age. It has become widely accepted that it is essential to make ‘early interventions’ if young people are to avoid the path of criminality. This can mean that, by the age of eighteen, it is assumed too late to make much difference. But, as the Commission report shows, decisions taken about whether young adults between the age of 18 and 24 should be imprisoned have a huge impact on their likelihood to commit crime in the future.

Baroness Scotland, Minister of State for Criminal Justice and Offender Management, said:

‘I greatly welcome the Barrow Cadbury Commission’s report. The National Offender Management Service Director who is leading this work has met with the Barrow Cadbury Trust to discuss how this can be taken forward’

1. Young Adults in the Criminal Justice System: Cost and Benefit Considerations, commissioned by Barrow Cadbury Trust, authors Roger Bowles & Rimawan Praditpyo, University of York.

2. Lost in Transition, the report of the Barrow Cadbury Commission on Young Adults and Criminal Justice.

What is wrong with the system?

Most eighteen year olds remain emotionally and socially immature, dependent on parental or state support and powerfully influenced by their peers. But the criminal justice system treats everyone 18 and over as an adult whatever their level of maturity. Tough sentences in adult prisons, when applied to young adults who are immature, can be deeply counterproductive. Many of the efforts to address the causes of crime in the youth justice system stop, and young adults come under the influence of older repeat offenders. It is a well documented trend that most young adults who commit crime will give up as they go through their twenties and enter stable relationships and find legitimate livelihoods. But, if they are sent to prison, removed from these stabilizing factors, they will usually take many more years to grow out of crime.

Anne Owers, HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, said:

'This report puts the inadequacy of the provision for young adults in prison in the context of a criminal justice system that has ignored the needs of this lost generation. It should stimulate action from all the agencies responsible for their support and treatment'

Key recommendation:

This rigid division between the youth justice and adult justice system at the age of eighteen should be ended. Instead, the two systems should be bridged: treatment of young adults should depend on their level of maturity rather than their age.

As an interim solution before change of the whole system, "Transition to Adulthood" (T2A) teams should be established to coordinate between the many different government agencies responsible for the welfare of young adults – including in relation to housing, employment, drug and alcohol misuse. They would ensure that information and expertise built up about an individual in the youth justice system was properly transferred to the adult criminal justice system.

Other proposed solutions:

- Apart from the most serious cases, first time or minor offenders should be diverted away from prison. Under 23 year olds should be placed under supervision or given conditional cautions. It makes financial sense to concentrate resources on those at risk of serious offending rather than, at present, placing first time minor offenders in expensive custody.
- Since finding legitimate employment is such a powerful factor in reducing crime, the Government should adopt proactive policies to encourage young adults to enter work and obstacles to young adults with previous convictions working should be removed. Young adults under the age of 23 should no longer be required to reveal previous convictions (apart from certain exceptions for sexual or violent offences). They should also be allowed to do more than six weeks (the current limit) unpaid work experience without losing benefits.

Read the full *Lost in Transition* report by the Barrow Cadbury Commission on Young Adults and the Criminal Justice System at www.barrowcadbury.org.uk

Case study: Voice of Aston

Voice of Aston was set up in 2003 to provide a platform for "local youths to speak for themselves" in Aston, a patch of Victorian housing in inner city Birmingham. Once the area most famous for its football club but it has, in recent years, become just as well known for high levels of deprivation, drugs and gun crime. Although there is not a fixed target age group, Voice of Aston work divides roughly into two groups: under eighteens, where the focus is on prevention, and 18-24 year olds who have already been through the adult criminal justice system. In reality though, they help "anyone that needs it" – from primary school age children to young adults in their mid-twenties.

Barrow Cadbury, as part of their focus on young adults, have granted Voice of Aston £30 000 funding over two years to develop the organisation and to run a peer mediation and mentoring service. The grant has paid for a part-time coordinator who runs a youth club for younger teenagers out of the Voice of Aston office on some weekday evenings and on Saturday morning, and allowed mentoring and mediation to be put on a formal basis. They now have the resources to write up individual cases and compare the ways in which they have dealt with different situations. The mentoring service is run by a group of around ten volunteers in their early twenties, many of whom have been through the penal system themselves and want to warn the next generation of its consequences. The mentoring can range from formal sessions – showing a video on knife-crime provided by social services to a group – to going into the park or on to the streets and talking one-to-one with young people.

The mediation service was inspired by a long-running feud in Aston that culminated in a man being shot six times by several members of the same family. Many locals felt guilty that no one had intervened in the dispute's early stages. Basharat (Bash) Najib, one of the founders of Voice of Aston, says "It was a soap-opera – we'd hear the latest installment of the saga over several weeks. And then after the shooting we wondered if we could have done something about it". Already, several potentially nasty incidents have already been defused by quiet mediation. A teenager approached a Muslim girl and forcefully gave her his phone number. Her family was furious. "If we hadn't have intervened, guns could easily have come out" says Bash. During the 2005 disturbances in Lozells, Asian and Afro-Caribbean volunteers from Voice of Aston walked the streets to demonstrate solidarity and prevent the ethnic tensions from seeping into next door Aston.

Voice of Aston attributes their stability to the two-years of funding from Barrow Cadbury. The kind of help that they offer 18-24 year olds – those overlooked by other groups – is flexible and not easily categorised. Much of the work is with young adults who are unemployed or trapped in casual, low-skill, low-pay jobs, who come for advice on work placements and getting a place on courses at local colleges. "We can really get through to them", says Bash.

Voice of Aston are one of many grassroots groups working in partnership with Barrow Cadbury Trust. For further information on them or any other aspect of Barrow Cadbury, contact Alice Murray on 0207 391 9220 or alicemurray@barrowcadbury.org.uk

Sukhvinder Stubbs, Chief Executive of the Barrow Cadbury Trust, said:

'Barrow Cadbury are one of very few organisations who fund grassroots projects for those between the ages of 18 and 24. In many cases these projects are the last chance to steer these young adults away from crime'

Six months on: what's happening now?

The Barrow Cadbury Trust are currently designing and funding a pilot of the Transition to Adulthood (T2A) scheme in the West Midlands. The Trust will also distribute £5 million over 3 years to mainly Midlands-based grassroots groups. The new funding guidelines for the Young Adults and Criminal Justice programme have just been launched. The focus will be on groups working with young adults to develop the Commission's recommendations on mental health, drug and alcohol abuse and education and employment opportunities.

As a Trust, Barrow Cadbury are able to be flexible in supporting grassroots projects that are ignored by other funders. Often these projects that make a real difference are too small for public bodies to fund or lack the long-track record to be able to prove their worth over several years. Unlike funders answerable to the public purse who have to take into account public opinion, the Barrow Cadbury Trust have the freedom to fund worthy causes – for instance young adults who have been in the criminal justice system – that are given a hostile press.

Visit www.barrowcadbury.org.uk to view the guidelines for the Young Adult and Criminal Justice programme.

Key Statistics

- It costs £50,000 to keep a young adult in prison for a year³.
- Over 90 per cent of imprisoned young offenders have one or a combination of the following conditions: personality disorders, psychosis, neurotic disorder, or substance misuse⁴.
- The peak age of criminal activity – the age when young people commit the most crimes – is 19. The average age at which offending stops is 23.
- From 1992 – 2002 the number of young adults in custody increased by nearly fifty per cent.

3. House of Commons Hansard Written Answers for 04 July 2006 (pt 1428)

4. This and all other statistics in the report are, unless marked otherwise, from the Barrow Cadbury Commission on Young Adults and Criminal Justice.