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Being Young Inside: young adult transitions across the long-term prison sentence

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In Partnership with the Building Futures programme

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- Improving treatment and conditions for prisoners and their families.
- Promoting equality and human rights in the justice system.

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Executive summary

Young adults sentenced to long periods of imprisonment face a distinct set of challenges shaped by their stage of development, prior life experiences and the length of time they will spend in custody. This report draws on in-person consultations with 41 young adult men serving long sentences across four prisons in England and Wales, alongside written contributions and existing evidence, to explore how young adults experience the early stages of long-term imprisonment and how this shapes their trajectories through custody.

The findings show that many young adults enter prison with prior experience of state institutions, including the care system, alternative education provision and youth custody, often alongside extensive experiences of trauma, exclusion, racism and multiple disadvantage. These experiences shape how young adults cope with custody and form relationships with staff and peers in prison. Receiving a long sentence at a young age can be profoundly disorientating, with many struggling to comprehend sentences that are equal or exceed their age, with long-term impacts for their wellbeing and ability to imagine a future for themselves.

The report highlights significant gaps in age-appropriate and trauma-informed support for young adults serving long sentences. Inconsistent access to purposeful activity, limited provision for those who are neurodiverse and strained relationships with staff can exacerbate harms and undermine progression. Conversely, supportive relationships, meaningful family contact and access to mentors and purposeful activity aimed at the specific age of this group can play a critical role in helping young adults adapt and develop while in custody.

As the number of young adults serving long sentences continues to grow, this report calls for a clearer strategic approach across the prison system. It sets out recommendations for policy and practice that recognise young adulthood as a distinct stage requiring specific provision to ensure young people who will spend much of their formative years in prison are supported to survive custody and build a future beyond it.

Recommendations

1. **His Majesty's Prison & Probation Service (HMPPS) should implement a policy framework for long-term prisoners, highlighting the distinct needs of those in different age groups.**

The policy framework should equip prison management and staff with an in-depth understanding of the challenges associated with serving a long sentence at different stages of the life course, including in relation to risk levels, progression, family contact and purposeful activity

2. **HMPPS should provide age- and trauma-informed training for all staff working with young adults serving long sentences.**

This should equip staff with an understanding of the common prior life experiences of this cohort, including exposure to trauma, the care system, school exclusion, racism and multiple disadvantage, and how these experiences may shape behaviour and relationships in custody. It should also develop staff's racial and cultural literacy, supporting culturally competent and anti-racist practice. It should also include practical guidance on communicating effectively with young adults and working appropriately with neurodiverse individuals. People with lived experience of serving long sentences should be involved in the design and delivery of this training.

3. **HMPPS should develop a 'staged' approach to sentence management for young adults serving long sentences in order to enable them to feel actively engaged in progressing through their sentence.**

This should include an individualised and manageable plan with clear, achievable goals, meaningful milestones and genuine opportunities for progression at different stages of the sentence. Young adults serving long sentences, people with lived experience and other relevant stakeholders should be centrally involved in the design and ongoing review of this approach.

4. **HMPPS should review prison education contracts to ensure young adults serving long sentences have access to meaningful education and training opportunities.**

This review should prioritise the expansion of creative, practical, vocational and therapeutic opportunities aimed at the specific neurological and developmental needs of this group. Education and training opportunities should be designed to support long-term engagement and skill development over the course of a long sentence.

5. **HMPPS should develop a Partners in Progress strategy to strengthen and formalise the role of supportive relationships in the lives of young adults serving long sentences.**

This strategy should support prisons to review and expand their use of both formal and informal peer-based support, including mentors, peer workers, prison visitors and befriending schemes. In particular, young adults serving long sentences should have regular access to mentors who can offer guidance and emotional support, including older prisoners serving long sentences and people with lived experience of long sentences who are now living in the community.

6. **Prison governors should consult with prisoners to consider alternative methods of dealing with conflict resolution, to allow for regimes to be less governed by 'keep-aparts'.**

This should involve learning from examples of good practice across the prison estate and youth custody estate and should consider the needs and views of young adults serving long sentences.

7. **Prison governors in prisons holding young adults serving long sentences should prioritise access to facilities which contribute to healthy, constructive coping and meaningful expressions of self-identity.**

This should include reliable access to self-cook facilities, exercise facilities and other resources that promote physical health, emotional regulation and a sense of autonomy. Given the importance of routine and stability for those serving long sentences, changes to regimes that affect access to these facilities should be minimised wherever possible. Where changes are unavoidable, they should be communicated clearly and in a timely manner, with consideration given to the impact such disruptions can have on young adults' wellbeing and ability to cope.

8. **The government should remove restrictions which prevent prisoners accessing funding for higher education based on their sentence stage, particularly with young adults in mind.**

Opportunities to engage in higher education are widely viewed by young adults as a meaningful and constructive way of spending time in custody. Restricting access to funding until the latter years of a sentence not only delays personal development but also undermines motivation among those who are keen to use their time productively from the outset.

9. **Prison governors in prisons holding young adults serving long sentences should prioritise sustained and meaningful contact with young adult prisoners and their loved ones.**

This should involve greater flexibility and recognition of the full range of supportive relationships, extending beyond the biological family to include partners, friends and other significant figures who provide emotional stability and continuity. Practical mechanisms to improve contact should include reducing the financial costs associated with maintaining relationships (for example, through expanded and affordable use of digital communication), as well as providing additional visits, family days and opportunities for extended, relational contact. Strengthening these connections is critical to young adults' wellbeing.

10. **HMPPS should provide structured opportunities for young adults serving long sentences to contribute to and lead consultations on how their lives in custody could be improved.**

These opportunities should be meaningful rather than symbolic, with clear feedback loops demonstrating how young adults' views have informed decision-making. Providing young adults with opportunities to shape policies and regimes that affect them can strengthen feelings of dignity and respect and improve relationships between prisoners and prison management and staff.

About this report

The Building Futures programme

Building Futures is the Prison Reform Trust's programme funded by the National Lottery Community Fund that explores the experiences of people serving long prison sentences. It aims to give voice to those serving long-term prison sentences. The programme has defined its long-term cohort to include those men that will spend ten or more years in prison and eight or more for women, providing them with the space to advocate for themselves, bringing about change from within the system and shedding light on the human cost of long-term imprisonment. Through consultation, advocacy and research, Building Futures works alongside those with direct experience of long-term imprisonment to demonstrate the true impact of ever-increasing sentence lengths.

A fundamental component of this work is the development of a network of prisoners and former prisoners with direct experience of long-term imprisonment, allowing for impactful collaboration with those the programme represents. The Building Futures Network (BFN) has an active membership of roughly 1,000 prisoners, former prisoners and family members of prisoners. In addition to this, the Building Futures programme has also been working closely with a range of academics, practitioners and other third sector organisations to more holistically understand what it means to serve, progress through and be released from a period of long-term imprisonment.

The purpose of this report

Published in September 2024, *Growing old and dying inside: improving the experiences of older people serving long prison sentences* highlighted findings drawn from a widescale consultation with men and women serving long prison sentences in prisons in England and Wales.[1] With an increasingly ageing population in an overcrowded prison estate, the report highlighted the specific needs and concerns of older prisoners through the themes of sentencing and adapting to prison life, relationships outside, purposeful activity, relationships inside, health and wellbeing, and imagined futures.

The consultation largely took place through written responses to questions on the ways age shapes experiences of prison:

- How old were you when you were sentenced?
- How do you think this impacts your experience of long-term imprisonment?
- Does your age have an impact on how you adjust and cope with a long-term prison sentence?
- How has this changed over time?
- Do types or categories of prison make a difference depending on your age?

Whilst the consultation invited responses from prisoners of all ages, the majority of responses came from those who were older, hence the focus on older prisoners for the first report in the series. However, we also received responses that referred to the experiences of young adults in prison - how either they themselves experienced prison at a younger age, or how they perceived younger people were experiencing their sentences.

As the number of young adults aged 18-24 receiving long sentences is increasing, this is an area that would benefit from further reporting and consultation to inform policy, provision and practice across the prison estate.[2] What are the reflections from those towards the end of a long sentence on their early years in prison? What are the experiences of young people currently sentenced to more than ten years in prison? What might we learn from consulting with those who are either facing, or have faced a long sentence from a young age? What improvements could be made to support young adults as they navigate through a long sentence and 'grow up' in prison?

This report seeks to highlight the specific needs and experiences of young adults serving long sentences in prisons in England and Wales, gathered through an extended in-person consultation with small groups across four prison sites. Given the growth in the numbers of young adults serving long sentences, the

1 Prison Reform Trust (2024). *Growing old and dying inside.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Growing-old-and-dying-inside.pdf

2 Ministry of Justice (2020). Freedom of Information request 201117009, 15 December 2020, available at: https://bit.ly/U25-lifers-15-plus

increase in their average sentence length,[3] and the wider concerns around prison conditions,[4] this is a timely piece of work that challenges local and national prison governors, and central government, to consider ways this specific cohort might be better served. If we are sending children and young people to prison for periods close to or longer than double their age at sentencing, then the prison service has a responsibility to take care of their wellbeing and transitions into adulthood as they 'grow up' in prison.

While we did receive some written contributions from women who have been serving long sentences since they were between 18 and 24, the in-person consultation focused on the experiences of young adults in the men's prison estate. Further work is needed to consider the unique and disproportionate impact of long sentences on women who are convicted as young adults. This includes gender-specific challenges relating to fertility and reproductive health, the prevalence of trauma among women in prison, prior experiences of care, and age- and gender-specific provision for women serving long sentences.[5] Where the written contributions from young adult women are included, this is noted.

Methods

A two-stage approach was taken to generate the findings presented in this report. The data collected through the written consultation conducted for the Building Futures age series was reviewed, and themes related to the young adult stage of the long sentence were collated. These themes then formed the background to an in-person consultation that took place between February and April 2025. Focus groups with young adult men (aged 25 and under) serving in excess of 10 years were held at HMP Frankland, HMP/YOI Isis, HMP Swaleside and HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall. At HMP Frankland, a one-off focus group was held to introduce the themes of the consultation and receive feedback on its focus and approach. At the other sites, multi-focus groups were held, with four groups each meeting a minimum of three times. This helped build rapport and trust between the facilitators of the groups and the participants, and also amongst the group participants themselves. This also allowed for in-depth consideration of the themes whilst enabling the young adults to introduce new topics as the discussion developed.

The groups met in rooms on a landing on their wings, in 'teaching' or group spaces adjacent to their wings, multi-faith spaces or specialised workshop rooms in training/education hubs in the prison. In some cases, the individuals in the groups were already familiar with each other, either through participating in programmes together, being housed on the same wing or, in the case of HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall, on a 'lifers' wing. In other cases, the groups were brought together for the purposes of the consultation. - This resulted in individuals previously not known to each other coming together to discuss their common experience of the early stages of a long-term sentence. This in-person consultation was made possible through the support of prison leaders and staff at the four prisons, and the authors of this report owe a deep gratitude to the participants who gave time and offered their insightful and at times deeply personal, reflections on their prison experiences.

Who contributed to this consultation?

In total, 41 young adult men took part in the consultation, across the four prison sites. The ages of those involved ranged from 18 to 27.[6] In relation to the age they were when they were sentenced, the youngest had been 14 when he received his sentence, the oldest was 23. The most common age when sentenced was 19. The majority of those involved were serving life sentences, but several were also serving extended determinate sentences (EDS) or long determinate sentences. Their sentences varied in length, with the shortest being 9 years (though this individual was currently over-tariff) to 30 years. The average custodial term was 19 years.

3 Ministry of Justice (2024). Table 2.A.10, Prison receptions: 2023. Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2023 and previous editions.

4 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2025). Annual report 2024–25. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/annual-report-2024-25/

5 See the Invisible Women series by the Prison Reform Trust for further information: https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/invisible-women-hope-health-and-staff-prisoner-relationships/ ; see also Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2017). The gendered pains of life imprisonment. *British Journal of Criminology* 57(6): 1359-1378.

6 In one of the prison sites, one consultee was aged 27, his involvement was agreed on the basis that he had been sentenced as a young adult and worked as a young adult representative in the prison. He had strong relationships with other young adults across the prison and supported the consultation with recruiting further consultees.

Report structure

The next section of the report gives an overview of the existing literature on the experiences of young adults serving long prison sentences. This includes an outline of the trends in relation to long prison sentences and the growth in the numbers of young adults serving very long prison terms. The third section sets out the key themes that emerged, including prior experiences of public institutions, the challenges of receiving and coping with a long sentence as a young adult, reflections on relationships, prison facilities, activities and issues surrounding race, ethnicity and religion. The report concludes with a summary of the main findings and recommendations for policy and practice.

Understanding the experiences of young adults serving long prison sentences

There is a growing body of evidence that highlights the distinct needs of young adults aged 18 to 24 years, due to ongoing social and neurological maturation and high prevalence of adverse childhood experiences within this population.[7] Involvement within the criminal justice system is known to be damaging at this formative stage of development, often disrupting education, employment trajectories and prosocial relationships as well as entrenching cycles of disadvantage.[8] As a result, young adults may be more vulnerable to harm from standard criminal justice approaches, particularly lengthy periods of imprisonment, highlighting the importance of evidence-based, developmentally-informed policy and practice to mitigate the long-term harms of custody and improve outcomes for young adults serving long sentences.

The context

In this report, the term 'young adults' is used to refer to individuals aged 18 to 24 years, reflecting a substantial body of literature identifying this group as having distinct development needs and pathways into the criminal justice system. This terminology is also consistent with the framing used across much of the relevant research and policy discourse informing this consultation. However, it should be noted that there is a lack of consistency across the criminal justice system in defining the age range covered by the term 'young adults'. HM Prison and Probation Service policy and practice increasingly recognises that brain development and maturation take place up to the age of 25. Yet most data sources currently report on young adults aged 18-24. It is also worth noting that that there is no separate sentencing framework for young adults, as there is for those aged under 18. In 2024, the Sentencing Council proposed changes to the sentencing guidelines for those aged 18-25 years, in an attempt to recognise the neurological development of those within this cohort, including acknowledging their emotional and developmental age with at least equal importance to their chronological age.[9] In late 2025, young adults were recognised in the Sentencing Council's updated guidance on the imposition of community and custodial sentences.[10] While this does not establish separate sentencing guidelines for this group specifically, it represents a step towards acknowledging their distinct developmental and rehabilitative needs.

There are currently 10,324 young adults held in prisons in England and Wales, meaning they account for 12% of the total prison population.[11] Following sustained efforts to reduce the number of young people in custody, the overall number of young adults in prison has almost halved over the past 20 years.[12] However, this headline reduction masks a significant shift in sentencing patterns. The proportion of young adults entering custody to serve life sentences has increased markedly. In 2024, 50 individuals aged 18–20 entered custody to serve an indeterminate sentence, which is almost double the number recorded a decade earlier (30 individuals).[13] By December 2025, 6% of those aged 18-20 years were serving life sentences,[14] compared with 2% in December 2015.[15] A further 6% were serving extended determinate sentences and 17% were serving sentences of between two and four years – the most common standard determinate

7 See the Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A) website for more information: https://t2a.org.uk/

8 McAra L and McVie, S (2022). *Causes and Impacts of Offending and Criminal Justice Pathways: Follow-up of the Edinburgh Study Cohort at Age 35: Report to the Nuffield Foundation.* University of Edinburgh. https://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Causes-and-Impact-of-Offending-and-Criminal-Justice-Pathways.pdf

9 Sentencing Council (2024). *Miscellaneous amendments to sentencing guidelines: Consultation 2024* https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/publications/item/miscellaneous-amendments-to-sentencing-guidelines-consultation-2024/

10 Sentencing Council (2025). Imposition of community and custodial sentences: Effective from September 2025. https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/guidelines/imposition-of-community-and-custodial-sentences/

11 Ministry of Justice (2026). Table 1.Q.6, Prison population: 31 December 2025. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

12 Ministry of Justice (2025). Table 1.A.18, Prison population: 2025. Offender management statistics quarterly. January to March 2025. And previous editions.

13 Ministry of Justice (2025). Table 2.A.10, Prison receptions: 2024. Offender management statistics quarterly: October to December 2024. And previous editions.

14 Ministry of Justice (2025). Table 1.Q.2, Prison population: 31 December 2025. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

15 Ministry of Justice (2025). Table 1.A.2 , Prison population: 2025. Offender management statistics quarterly: January to March 2025.

sentence length.[16] The growing proportion of longer sentences among this group reflects wider changes in policing and sentencing practice, including the introduction of minimum sentencing guidelines (which have increased the penalties for knife-related offences), the continued use of joint enterprise prosecutions in cases involving multiple defendants and the increased use of Extended Determinate Sentences for young adults. In addition, within the young adult prison population, people from Black and other ethnic minority backgrounds remain significantly overrepresented.[17]

These figures demonstrate the substantial presence of young adults serving long sentences in the custodial estate. Despite their distinct developmental and rehabilitative needs, most young adults are held within the wider adult prison estate and are routinely mixed with older prisoners, limiting the extent to which regimes, support and rehabilitative provision are tailored to their developmental stage.[18] That being said, the evidence base relating to which kinds of custodial regimes are best suited to meet the needs of young adults is limited.[19]

As noted above, recent guidance from the Sentencing Council emphasises that age or lack of maturity should be considered as a mitigating factor in sentencing, recognising the differences in behaviour, decision-making and vulnerability between young adults and older adults.[20] The guidance also acknowledges the disproportionate impact that criminal justice sanctions can have on younger individuals. While there has been a long-term decline in the overall number of young adults in custody, this has been accompanied by growing concerns about increasing sentence lengths for this group.[21]

The use of the joint enterprise doctrine remains highly controversial. In 2016, the Supreme Court ruled that the doctrine had been misinterpreted and effectively abolished the concept of the 'parasitic accessory liability', which relied on a lower burden of proof. Despite this, concerns remain that joint enterprise continues to be applied in ways that are disproportionate. As a result of the notion of the 'gang' being inherently racialised, gang-related language and terminology is more likely to be used in court to infer the guilt of Black defendants, even when there is little evidence of gang involvement.[22] In joint enterprise cases where gang involvement was inferred, 69% of cases involved Black and minority ethnic defendants, while 30% involved white defendants.[23] In the decade to 2020, over 1,000 secondary subjects were convicted of murder or manslaughter, with young men from Black and other ethnic minority backgrounds significantly overrepresented among those convicted in multi-defendant cases involving serious violence.[24]

Growing attention has been drawn to the experiences of young adults in custody through a series of independent reviews and inspections. In 2015, the Harris Review examined self-inflicted deaths among young adults in prison and highlighted the vulnerability of this population, including high levels of mental ill-health, exposure to bullying and difficulties forming supportive relationships.[25] These findings remain relevant today. In 2024, individuals aged 18-24 accounted for 21% of all recorded self-harm incidents in custody.[26] In that same year, there were ten deaths among people aged 18-24, five of which were self-inflicted.[27]

Subsequent reports from the House of Commons Justice Committee[28] and HM Inspectorate of Prisons[29] have continued to identify poor treatment of young adults in custody, including limited access to purposeful activity, poor staff-prisoner relationships and inadequate support – which particularly affect young adults from Black and other minority backgrounds. While recent policy attention has focused on recognising

16 Ministry of Justice (2026). Table 1.Q.6, Prison population: 31 December 2025. Offender management statistics quarterly: July to September 2025.

17 Table 11, Kneen, H. (2017). An exploratory estimate of the economic cost of Black, Asian and minority ethnic net overrepresentation in the criminal justice system in 2015. Ministry of Justice.

18 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021). *Outcomes for young adults in custody.* Retrieved from: https://cdn.websitebuilder.service.justice.gov.uk/uploads/sites/19/2024/02/Young-adults-thematic-final-web-2021.pdf

19 See forthcoming research project from the Prison Reform Trust.

20 Sentencing Council (2025). Imposition of community and custodial sentences – effective from 1 September 2025. https://www.sentencingcouncil.org.uk/overarching-guides/magistrates-court/item/imposition-of-community-and-custodial-sentences-overarching-guideline/

21 House of Commons Library (2024). *UK Prison population statistics.* https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN04334/SN04334.pdf

22 Hulley, S., Crewe, B. & Wright, S. (2019). Making Sense of 'Joint Enterprise' for Murder: Legal Legitimacy or Instrumental Acquiescence? *The British Journal of Criminology*, *59*(6), 1328–1346. https://doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azz034

23 Williams, P. and Clarke, B. (2016). *Dangerous Associations: Joint Enterprise, Gangs and Racism*. Centre for Crime and Justice Studies.

24 Mills, H., Ford, M. and Grishaw, G. (2022). *The usual suspects: Joint enterprise prosecutions before and after the Supreme court ruling.* Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, November. https://barrowcadbury.org.uk/our-impact/publications-and-research/the-usual-suspects-joint-enterprise-prosecutions-before-and-after-the-supreme-court-ruling/

25 Harris, T. (2015). *The Harris Review: Changing prisons, saving* lives. *Report of the Independent Review into Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18-24 year olds.* https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439859/moj-harris-review-web-accessible.pdf

26 Ministry of Justice (2025). Safety in custody: Quarterly update to March 2025: Self harm in custody 2004-2024. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2025

27 Ministry of Justice (2025). Safety in custody: Quarterly update to March 2025: Deaths data tool. https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2025

28 House of Commons Justice Committee (2018). *Young adults in the criminal justice system: eighth report of session 2017-19.* https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmjust/419/419.pdf

29 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021). *Outcomes for young adults in custody*. Retrieved from: https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/outcomes-for-young-adults-in-custody/

maturity as a relevant factor in assessment and sentencing, there have been persistent criticisms regarding inconsistent implementation and the absence of a clear, distinct strategic approach to meeting the needs of young adults across the prison system.[30]

Sentencing, coping and adaptation

Imprisonment at a young age represents a profound disruption or rupture that breaches identity, social ties and life-course trajectories. Young adults given long sentences commonly experience 'existential' questions about who they are and what their life will become, at a time when identity formation is still underway.[31] Since neurological development continues into the mid-20s, young adults may struggle to comprehend the meaning and consequences of a long sentence; in many cases the sentence they receive is equal to or longer than their lived experience to date. In extreme cases, and as found in this consultation, some sentence lengths equate to double the length of time the young adult has been alive. Such sentencing can have profound psychological consequences, including acute stress and anxieties about "their place in the world, the kind of life they are able to construct inside prison and what they have lost as a result of the sentence".[32] Young adult prisoners may mourn a life not lived, disrupted life course and absence of expected social and developmental milestones – including education, employment, intimate relationships and rites of passage associated with adulthood.

Identity, rehabilitation and adaptation

Young adults in custody frequently have extensive prior experience of state institutions, including local authority care, secure children's homes or other custodial settings. Nearly half of young men and two thirds of young women (aged 16-21) in custody have recently been in statutory care.[33] Such histories mean that many have already endured disrupted life trajectories, limited opportunities for stable relationships and repeated exposure to institutional authority from an early age. Rather than supporting growth or personal development, the prison environment often reinforces a negative self-image, with life markers, such as employment, relationships, or family roles, replaced with compliance with institutional rules and routines. For young adults, this can entrench marginalisation and hinder the development of skills, social networks and autonomy necessary for life outside custody.

Age at sentencing is a critical determinant to how individuals develop, mature and adapt to imprisonment. Psychological distress following sentencing is often intense and characterised by uncertainty, loss of autonomy and deprivation of freedom and control.[34] In prison, 'identity is stripped from them and, ultimately, reconstructed by the institutions they are constrained within'.[35] Some adaptive identities that serve to help people cope within custody may be maladaptive post-release if they are shaped solely by institutional norms.[36] For young people who have spent much of their lives navigating institutions, there may be a sense of institutionalisation, having learned how to survive in often volatile environments. This form of adaptation – performing 'an institutionally acceptable form of themselves' shaped by their offence and risk level – can be complex to unlearn and may further entrench marginalised identities.[37]

The initial shock of imprisonment is especially acute when prisoners cannot see a way out. This can be profoundly detrimental to mental well-being, especially so for younger adults at a crucial stage of neurological development and identity formation. Prior destabilising and 'emotionally costly'[38] experiences may leave these individuals with limited emotional and practical resources to cope with their circumstances.[39] Research indicates that imprisonment is associated with lasting mental health effects, including post-traumatic stress, sleep disturbance, altered personality traits (e.g. decision-making), feelings of alienation and disruption to relationships.[40]

30 Ibid.
31 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: adaptation, identity and time*. Palgrave Macmillan.
32 Ibid. Page 2.
33 Barrow Cadbury Trust / Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance https://data.parliament.uk/WrittenEvidence/CommitteeEvidence.svc/EvidenceDocument/Justice/Young%20adult%20offenders/written/21967.html
34 Harvey, J. (2007). *Young men in prison: surviving and adapting to life inside.* Routledge.
35 Warr, J. (2020). 'Always gotta be two mans': Lifers, risk, rehabilitation and narrative labour, *Punishment and Society,* 22(1): 28-47. Page 28.
36 Liem, M. & Kunst, M. (2013). Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released lifers? *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 36(3-4), 333-337.
37 Warr, J. (2020). 'Always gotta be two mans': Lifers, risk, rehabilitation and narrative labour, *Punishment and Society, 22*(1): 28-47. Page 28.
38 Maguire, D. (2021). *Male, Failed, Jailed Masculinities and "Revolving-Door" Imprisonment in the UK,* Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan. Page 93.
39 Tynan, R. (2022). 'Living in the present, imagining a future: Children and young people navigating the mandatory life sentence, *Prison Service Journal,* 261: 27-32.
40 Liem, M., & Kunst, M. (2013). Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released "lifers"? *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, *36*(3-4), 333–337; see also Rennie, A. (2024) *Release from long-term imprisonment: Understanding the experiences of people released from the longest sentences and returning to the community.* Prison Reform Trust.

The prison environment itself, where individuals witness others' self-harm and psychological distress, can intensify suffering, particularly among those who have prior experiences of trauma.[41] For many, prison itself is re-traumatising and triggering, which impacts the way they experience life in custody.[42] For young adults in particular, prior experience of violence is known to impact their experience of prison, with 'banging doors linked to gun shots, boots on floors to the approach of rival gangs and the authoritarian style of prison officers to teachers who had wanted to use rules to punish and exclude'.[43] Although maintaining good health, well-being and purposeful routines can act as coping mechanisms, prison environments often lack the facilities and conditions necessary to support personal development.[44] Access to healthcare, physical exercise and adequate nutrition is important but frequently insufficient or inconsistent.[45]

Neurodiversity

The term 'neurodiversity' encompasses a wide range of conditions, including autism spectrum conditions, traumatic brain injury and learning disabilities, all conditions that are disproportionately common among young adult prisoners.[46] HM Inspectorate of Prisons has found inconsistent provision for neurodivergent prisoners, including gaps in the recording of data, assessments and staff awareness. Behaviours associated with those who are neurodiverse may be interpreted as 'difficult', leading to more punitive sanctions and responses.[47] Young adults are often viewed predominantly as perpetrators, a framing that can mask their vulnerabilities and extensive histories of victimisation.[48] Behavioural reactions such as aggression and rejection of authority may reflect trauma and developmental responses rather than wilful misconduct.[49] A lack of age and trauma-informed approaches for young adults, combined with punitive responses from staff to challenging behaviours, can obscure the underlying experiences of harm and adversity that these individuals have endured.[50]

Institutional factors

The type and culture of a prison significantly shape how young adults adapt to custody. Research consistently highlights that young adults are often distributed unevenly across the prison estate, reflecting the absence of a coherent policy framework for this age group.[51] Some note that the unique vulnerabilities of the young adult population, including youthful age, ongoing maturation and complex welfare needs, highlights the need for holding young adult men separately from older adults, in order to provide distinct, age-specific provision.[52] This sentiment has not been consistently translated into practice, as even prisons exclusively holding young adults are seen to be increasingly 'adult like', without sufficient acknowledgment of the unique needs of this cohort.[53]

While mixing with older adults can, in some contexts, offer informal guidance or mentorship for younger prisoners, it frequently results in the distinct needs of young adult prisoners being overlooked. Younger prisoners may be exposed to intimidating or coercive environments, with institutional expectations shaped around older, more experienced prisoners.[54] Some mixed-age environments can heighten young adults' vulnerability to victimisation while simultaneously increasing pressure to adopt defensive or violent behaviours as a means of survival.[55]

Efforts to address these risks through dedicated young adult provision can be beneficial where they are adequately resourced and underpinned by specialist staff training.[56] However, such provision may also

41 Vince, C. & Evison, E. (2021). *Invisible women: Understanding women's experiences of long term imprisonment*, Prison Reform Trust. http://www.prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/invisible_women.pdf

42 Wolff, N., Shi, J., & Siegel, J. A. (2009). Patterns of Victimization Among Male and Female Inmates: Evidence of an Enduring Legacy. *Violence and Victims*, *24*(4), 469–484.

43 O'Rourke, R. (2022). *The nature and impact of trauma in young adult prisoners: Screening for trauma and exploring the past and present experiences* (Doctoral dissertation, Nottingham Trent University), Page 162. Retrieved from https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/47354/1/Rachel%20O%27Rourke%202022.pdf

44 Kolivoski, K. M., & Shook, J. J. (2016). Incarcerating Juveniles in Adult Prisons: Examining the Relationship Between Age and Prison Behavior in Transferred Juveniles. *Criminal Justice and Behavior*, *43*(9), 1242–1259.

45 Armstrong, S. (2018). The cell and the corridor: Imprisonment as waiting, and waiting as mobile. *Time & Society*, *27*(2), 133–154.

46 House of Commons Justice Committee (2018). *Young adults in the criminal justice system: eighth report of session 2017-19.* https://publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201719/cmselect/cmjust/419/419.pdf

47 Criminal Justice Joint Inspectorates (2021). *Neurodiversity in the criminal justice system: a review of the evidence.* https://cjji.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/inspection-report/neurodiversity-in-the-criminal-justice-system-a-reivew-of-evidence/

48 Levell, J. (2022). *Boys, childhood domestic abuse, and gang involvement: Violence at home, violence on-road.* Bristol University Press.

49 Maguire, D. (2021). *Male, Failed, Jailed Masculinities and "Revolving-Door" Imprisonment in the UK*, Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan.

50 Price, J. (2021). Violence, Control and Restraint: The Harms to Young Adults Particularly Upon Transition, *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice, 60*(4): 511-528.

51 Bateman, T. & Hazel, N. (2019). *Evidence review of the development of the secure estate for children and young people in England*. Centre for Justice Innovation.

52 Gooch, K. (2025). *Prison violence: The search for recognition and respect.* Palgrave Macmillan.

53 Ibid. Page 204.

54 Crewe, B. (2011). Depth, weight, tightness: Revisiting the pains of imprisonment. *Punishment & Society*, 13(5), 509–529.

55 Gooch, K. (2025). *Prison violence: The search for recognition and respect.* Palgrave Macmillan.

56 Bateman, T. & Hazel, N. (2019). *Evidence review of the development of the secure estate for children and young people in England*. Centre for Justice Innovation.

generate unintended consequences, including young adult prisoners being held further from home or experiencing abrupt or arbitrary transitions later in the sentence. In some cases, prisons have responded by establishing distinct wings for young adults. For example, HMP/YOI Deerbolt created a dedicated wing for young adults transitioning from the youth custody estate. However, recent inspections found that support was limited and many young adults, particularly those serving long or indeterminate sentences, did not receive adequate tailored support for progression.[57]

Purposeful activity

Time in custody should be purposeful. Adjusting to imprisonment involves managing time and reconstructing a sense of self that goes beyond the negative identities imposed by the conviction.[58] Although young people may perceive progression from youth to young adult custody as an opportunity for improved regimes and facilities,[59] research and independent inspections have repeatedly highlighted inadequate education,[60] vocational training[61] and other purposeful activity for young adult prisoners.[62] For example, at HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall, where many young adults (aged up to 28) serve long sentences, issues were reported in a recent inspection around staff-prisoner relationships and a lack of regime, both of which can impact upon future progression.[63]

Many young adult prisoners enter custody with disrupted and negative educational histories, and standard prison education provision often fails to engage them or to build foundational skills that support personal development.[64] Positive pro-social development requires distinct, age-appropriate learning and opportunities that are aligned with life course stages rather than generic adult provision. Without constructive engagement, prisoners can experience 'nothing time' – a sense of wasted time in which little meaning is achieved within the sentence.[65] A lack of structured opportunity can contribute to a loss of identity and meaning, undermining psychological well-being and potential for progression. For individuals serving long sentences, a range of opportunities that resonate with their stage in life is particularly important.

Relationships

Staff

Supportive relationships, both within and beyond the prison walls, are crucial to adaptation and wellbeing.[66] Relationships with staff play a central role in shaping young adults' experiences of imprisonment. For young adult prisoners, whose behaviour is often influenced by ongoing neurological development, trauma histories and learned coping strategies, interactions with staff can either mitigate or exacerbate harm.[67] Where staff lack understanding of the links between developmental immaturity, adverse childhood experiences and challenging behaviour, responses may default to punitive or disciplinary approaches. Such responses can escalate distress, undermine trust and entrench patterns of conflict rather than support progression.[68]

Young adults are more likely than older prisoners to struggle with rigid institutional rules, reflecting prior experiences of school exclusion, care systems and other state institutions.[69] When rule breaking is met primarily with punishment rather than age and trauma-informed responses, this can disrupt coping strategies and damage staff-prisoner relationships. These dynamics are particularly acute for young adults

57 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons of England & Wales (2025). Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP/YOI Deerbolt. https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-yoi-deerbolt-3/

58 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

59 Price, J. & Turner, J. (2021). (Custodial) spaces to grow? Adolescent development during custodial transitions. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 25(2), 225–241. https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2020.1865525

60 Maguire, D. (2021). *Male, Failed, Jailed Masculinities and "Revolving-Door" Imprisonment in the UK*, Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan.

61 Harris, T. (2015). The Harris Review: changing prisons, saving lives. Report of the Independent Review into Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18-24 year olds. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/439859/moj-harris-review-web-accessible.pdf

62 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021). *Outcomes for young adults in custody.* Retrieved from: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240417095855/https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/inspections/outcomes-for-young-adults-in-custody/

63 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2024). *Report on an unannounced inspection of HMP/YOI Swinfen Hall.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/hmp-yoi-swinfen-hall-3/

64 Szifris, K. (2021). *Philosophy behind bars: Growth and development in prison.* Bristol University Press.

65 Jarman, B. & Vince, C. (2022). *Making progress? What progression means for people serving the longest sentences*. Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Making_progress.pdf

66 Harvey, J. (2007). *Young men in prison: Surviving and adapting to life inside.* Routledge.

67 Harris, T. (2015). The Harris Review: changing prisons, saving lives. Report of the Independent Review into Self-inflicted Deaths in Custody of 18-24 year olds. See also Prior, D., Farrow, K., Hughes, N., Kelly, G., Manders, G., White, S. & Wilkinson, B. (2011). Maturity, young adults and criminal justice: a literature review. University of Birmingham. https://t2a.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/02/Birmingham-University-Maturity-final-literature-review-report.pdf

68 Price, J. (2021). Violence, Control and Restraint: The Harms to Young Adults Particularly Upon Transition, *The Howard Journal of Crime and Justice*, 60(4): 511-528. https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12418

69 Bateman, T. and Hazel, N. (2014). *Resettlement of Young People Leaving Custody*. Youth Justice Board.

from marginalised backgrounds. Black prisoners are more likely to experience negative interactions with staff and are disproportionately represented in use of force data.[70] Prior experiences of discrimination and institutional harm shape how authority is perceived, and without recognition of cultural differences, staff responses can reinforce marginalisation rather than promote supportive relationships.[71]

Consistent, respectful staff-prisoner relationships are therefore critical in reducing harm. Evidence consistently shows that when staff demonstrate fairness, empathy and understanding, young adults are more likely to feel safe and able to seek support when needed, as well as more able to engage constructively with their sentence.[72] Conversely, poor staff relationships can become a significant barrier to wellbeing and have adverse long-term outcomes for young adult prisoners.

Inter-prisoner relationships

Relationships with other prisoners play a central role in shaping identity and day-to-day survival within prison. Where relationships with staff are weak or characterised by mistrust, young adult prisoners may gravitate towards peer groups formed around shared experiences of marginalisation and exclusion.[73] While these relationships can provide protection and a sense of belonging, prisoners have expressed concern that association with peers of similar backgrounds may result in surveillance, stereotyping or being labelled as gang-affiliated, with adverse consequences for their treatment and progression.[74]

Young adulthood is frequently constructed within prisons as an 'immature' and high-risk stage, particularly within environments marked by violence and insecurity. In this context, dominant performances of masculinity, characterised by toughness, emotional expression and readiness to respond to perceived threats, are common and often learned as survival strategies rather than expressions of inherent disposition.[75] For some young men, violence or the need to 'prove oneself' may reflect a fear of victimisation and the necessity of avoiding any display of vulnerability.[76] Such behaviours may also be shaped by disrupted developmental trajectories and what has been described as 'protest masculinity', emerging from prior experiences of structural inequality and exclusion.[77]

For some, speaking with trusted peers can bring help and encouragement in times of need, particularly in relation to practical advice about navigating prison and interacting with prison staff.[78] Establishing meaningful relationships in prison can take time, but for many it is important to foster some degree of social existence based on companionship, trust, care and intimacy.[79] While relationships with peers in prison can be complex, when prisoners are housed alongside friends they knew prior to imprisonment, it allows for a deeper, more trusted bond.[80] Some relational dynamics between young adult prisoners have been seen to be characterised by 'loose companionship' and a means of ensuring personal safety, and while emotional trust and intimacy may be lacking in such relationships, they are grounded in a mutual protection that provides reassurance.[81] Similarly, those further along in the sentence have been seen to describe friendships which involve more complex emotional interactions involving mutual trust and the sharing of intimate, personal experiences. These relationships are more future orientated, with prisoners being more focused on nurturing relationships that will aid in their personal development, progression and eventual release from prison.[82]

70 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2022). *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/the-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff/

71 Liebling, A., Price, D. and Shefer, G. (2011). *The Prison Officer*. Willan Publishing.

72 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2021). *Outcomes for young adults in custody.* Retrieved from: https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20240417095855/https://www.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmiprisons/inspections/outcomes-for-young-adults-in-custody/

73 Erdem, G., Betül Yücesoy, Z. & Esra Ersayan, A. (2024). Daily experiences and close relationships incarcerated youth: Perspectives of inmates and prison staff. *Children and Youth Services Review*, *156*, 107286. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2023.107286

74 Warr, J. (2020). 'Always gotta be two mans': Lifers, risk, rehabilitation and narrative labour, *Punishment and Society, 22*(1): 28-47; Warr, J. (2023). Whitening Black Men: Narrative Labour and the Scriptural Economics of Risk and Rehabilitation, *British Journal of Criminology*, 63(5): 1091-1107. See also HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2022) *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/the-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff/

75 Gooch, K. (2025). *Prison violence: The search for recognition and respect.* Palgrave Macmillan.

76 Jewkes, Y. (2005). 'Men behind bars: "Doing" masculinity as an adaptation to imprisonment', *Men and Masculinities*, 8(1), 44–63.

77 Maguire, D. (2021). *Male, Failed, Jailed Masculinities and "Revolving-Door" Imprisonment in the UK*, Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan.

78 O'Rourke, R. (2022). *The nature and impact of trauma in young adult prisoners: Screening for trauma and exploring the past and present experiences* (Doctoral dissertation, Nottingham Trent University). Retrieved from https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/47354/1/Rachel%20O%27Rourke%202022.pdf

79 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

80 Levell, J. (2022). *Boys, childhood domestic abuse and gang involvement: Violence at home, violence on-road.* Bristol University Press.

81 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan. Page 237.

82 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Outside contact

The breakdown of relationships during imprisonment, including the inability to fulfil family roles, can exacerbate the harms of custody. Prisoners' lives are effectively 'on hold' while relationships outside evolve or deteriorate.[83] Relationships with family and others outside are often fragile prior to imprisonment and may become further strained or ruptured by the physical separation and practical barriers imposed by imprisonment. For many prisoners, this disconnection can intensify feelings of loss and exclusion.

The family roles that hold particular significance vary by age and gender. Younger men often emphasise their roles within 'natal' families, particularly as sons or brothers, while women are more likely to define their identities through caregiving roles, especially motherhood.[84] Prison regimes are often incompatible with family life, particularly for those serving long sentences and held far from home.[85] Family bonds are known to be central for prisoners in relation to rehabilitation and resettlement, but also for their wellbeing and hope while in prison.[86] That being said, for people serving long prison sentences, many disclose feelings of profound loss as, over time, friends move on, families change and people die.[87] Offence type, stigma and shame can further restrict engagement with loved ones and some prisoners may intentionally cut off contact as a way of coping with the sentence or protecting loved ones from the burdens of imprisonment.[88] For young adults serving long or indeterminate sentences, sustaining contact with loved ones outside can be challenging and inconsistent, sometimes increasing the psychological burden of imprisonment.[89]

Imagined futures

Sentence length plays a significant role in shaping prisoners' experiences and their capacity to imagine a future beyond imprisonment. For those sentenced at a young age, particularly to long or indeterminate sentences, custody often requires the abandonment of previously imagined futures and a fundamental reworking of life expectations. Imprisonment can be viewed as a hiatus within the life course[90] suspending future expectations.[91] Younger prisoners may struggle to contemplate life beyond prison not only because of the sentence imposed, but also because of their developmental stage and limited life experience.[92] Those who have 'grown up' in prison may experience a tension between stunted maturation and accelerated ageing. While their social and emotional development may be constrained by institutional life, the physical and psychological toll of imprisonment may bring about challenges with their physical and mental health.[93] For some, this results in a profound sense of loss, described as the bereavement of one's self and the life that continues outside the prison walls.[94] At the early stage, younger prisoners can feel that their life is over with the sentence becoming a dominant feature of their identity and perceptions for the future.

The prison environment itself further constrains imagined futures by severing young adults from their prior lives and limiting opportunities for positive development in the present.[95] Experiences, skills and forms of cultural capital valued in the outside world are often inaccessible or hard to acquire in custody, particularly for those held for long periods.[96] Institutional routines, prison rules and survival mechanisms learned at a young age may be adaptive within prison but poorly suited to life beyond it. Young adult prisoners may therefore develop coping mechanisms, such as emotional suppression, hypervigilance or impulsive responses to threat, that could undermine stability upon release.[97]

83 Kotova, A. (2019). 'Time … lost time': Exploring how partners of long-term prisoners experience the temporal pains of imprisonment. *Time & Society*, *28*(2), 478–498.

84 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

85 Hutton, M. & O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf

86 Ministry of Justice. (2017). *The Importance of Strengthening Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime;* And Ministry of Justice. (2019). *The Importance of Strengthening Female Prisoners' Family Ties to Prevent Reoffending and Reduce Intergenerational Crime.*

87 Hutton, M. & O'Brien, R. (2024). *A Long Stretch: The challenge of maintaining relationships for people serving long prison sentences.* Prison Reform Trust. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/A_Long_Stretch.pdf

88 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan. See also Harvey, J. (2007). *Young men in prison: Surviving and adapting to life inside.* Routledge.

89 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

90 Jarman, B (2020) Only one way to swim? The offence and the life course in accounts of adaptation to life imprisonment, *British Journal of Criminology 60*(6), 1460-1479, Page 1474.

91 Jewkes, Y. (2005) 'Loss, liminality and the life sentence: Managing identity through a disrupted life course' in A. Liebling and S. Maruna. (eds) *The effects of imprisonment,* (pp. 366-388). Willan.

92 O'Rourke, R. (2022). *The nature and impact of trauma in young adult prisoners: Screening for trauma and exploring the past and present experiences* (Doctoral dissertation, Nottingham Trent University). Retrieved from https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/47354/1/Rachel%20O%27Rourke%202022.pdf

93 Gooch, K. (2017). 'Kidulthood': Ethnography, juvenile prison violence and the transition from 'boys' to 'men'. Criminology & Criminal Justice, 19(1), 80-97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895817741519

94 Jewkes, Y. (2005) 'Loss, liminality and the life sentence: Managing identity through a disrupted life course' in A. Liebling and S. Maruna. (eds) *The effects of imprisonment* (pp. 366-388). Willan.

95 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020) *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

96 Maruna, S. (2001). *Making Good: How Ex-Convicts Reform and Rebuild Their Lives*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

97 Liem, M. & Kunst, M. (2013). Is there a recognizable post-incarceration syndrome among released lifers? *International Journal of Law and Psychiatry*, 36(3-4), 333-337.

Findings

The themes below draw on the existing evidence base and research, while being firmly grounded in the contributions of prisoners who participated in the consultation. They take as the starting point the significant themes that emerged from the previous report in this series, which captured reflections from older prisoners about the experience of serving a long sentence.[98] These are then updated with the contributions of the 41 young adults serving long sentences who took part in the in-person focus groups in 2025. Where we draw on responses we received to the original written consultation, this is indicated in references.

The substantive content that emerged from the combination of the two consultation methods has been organised into themes in what might be considered a chronological order: experiences of public institutions prior to the long-term prison sentence, receiving the sentence, coping with the sentence in the early stages, and (re)imagined futures. Within each of these stages, or transitions of the sentence, significant subthemes emerge: education and purposeful activity, prison facilities, relationships (with staff, peers and family and friends outside of prison), and the significance of race, ethnicity and religion.

Prior experiences of public institutions

Findings from both the written consultation and the focus groups indicate extensive, and often negative and traumatic, experiences of institutions prior to the long-term sentence. On the one hand, some reflected that this helped them adapt to the prison term, but on the other these experiences often deepened mistrust in professional staff and systems of support. Many reported being repeatedly let down, pushed out of education settings or facing challenges as a result of being in local authority care. Research into the education[99] and care-experience[100] backgrounds of the prison population in England and Wales suggests that the impacts of these factors should be considered more specifically when focusing on young adults serving long sentences. In particular, it is important to explore how prior experiences may shape early coping in custody and influence progression through the sentence. The below account is from a woman serving a life sentence who contributed to the original written consultation. She is now in her 40s but reflects on the experience of 'growing up' in prisons and other state institutions:

> *"I believe being a young offender doing a long sentence is more damaging than if I had been an adult. I grew up in the prison/hospital system from the age of 14 and still am at the age of 42. Learning how to cope is not easy as I was still developing and growing psychologically, physically and emotionally. In some of the establishments, I learnt habits and behaviours that were not helpful for my mental state, emotional wellbeing and my sentence progression i.e. drug taking, self-harming, physical and verbal aggression to people in authority (prison officers, staff, nurses). It was particularly encouraged to get high on drugs, assault people due to their alleged offences. The older prisoners would tell me that young offenders get treated less harshly in adjudications than adult prisoners […] Now as a 42-year-old woman, and after extensive therapy interventions, I recognise that those behaviours were unacceptable and highly anti-social. I have learnt valuable lessons and skills in how to manage myself as an adult in prison although I feel I am emotionally and psychologically scarred from my incarceration. Unfortunately, I have not grasped all the life skills I need due to growing up in a false environment. What skills we need to cope and survive a prison environment are vastly different to those I need to live in the community successfully."*

School exclusions

In line with statistics on school exclusions and qualification levels of the prison population in England and Wales, the group members shared widespread experiences of exclusions from mainstream schools.[101] In one of the smaller group meetings, each of the six of the participants detailed their education histories:

> *"I was kicked out of school early (Year 7). I was hanging around on the estate instead of going to school, I was then sent to another school [through a managed move] and then went to a PRU.[102] I didn't even finish the induction at the PRU".*

98 Prison Reform Trust (2024). *Growing old and dying inside*. https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/08/Growing-old-and-dying-inside.pdf

99 Arnez, J. & Condry, R. (2021). Criminological perspectives on school exclusion and youth offending. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, 26(1), 87–100. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2021.1905233 See also Graham, K. (2014). Does school prepare men for prison? *City*, 18(6), 824-836.

100 Gooch, K., Masson, I., Owens, A. & Waddington, E. (2022). After care, after thought: the invisibility of care experienced men and women in prison. *Prison Service Journal*, *258*(9), 4-12.

101 Prison Reform Trust (2025) *Bromley Briefings Prison Factfile February 2025.* https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/publication/bromley-briefings-prison-factfile-february-2025/

102 A Pupil Referral Unit (PRU) is a type of school that provides alternative education provision for children and young people who are at risk of exclusion, permanently excluded or are not attending their school for other reasons, including medical needs.

"Kicked out of all schools (by age 14), went to PRUs, and STC [Secure Training Centre] – kicked out of all of them"

"Went to 6-7 schools, mostly down to family moving. Went to PRUs, STC – all in different areas, had fights, jumped the gates."

"I got sent to a school in an area I was even supposed to be in!"

"Lots of my friends were not at school, so I went far enough away to another school that there wasn't any (road) politics to focus on".

"School was OK to Year 9, could do GCSEs from the exclusion rooms, then went to a PRU."

Pupil Referral Units

The alternative provision available to children excluded from school in Pupil Referral Units (PRUs), is often described as specialist, with smaller class sizes and facilities suitable for children with complex needs and behavioural problems.[103] However, critiques include restricted curriculum and opportunities to obtain the full range of skills and qualifications open to children in mainstream schools.[104] For some who attended such sites, they are acutely aware that they have been categorised as being a "bad lad", which is likely to impact their education attainment in future years.[105] There are also wider concerns about the ways in which education and criminal justice policies may interact to exclude, marginalise and ultimately criminalise young Black people, who are disproportionately represented within PRUs.[106] In relation to the physical environment, disciplinary regimes and restrictions on the curriculum within PRUs, some commentators note a troubling 'mirroring' with the environment of prison, suggesting that aspects of this alternative provision may normalise institutional control at an early age.[107] The impact of spending time in PRUs was discussed at length in the group sessions:

"PRU was like being on the wing, doors slamming, locked rooms, lots of noise and commotion."

"Problem with PRUs you've got different area kids together – if there are issues, that is automatically a problem then."

"PRU gets you ready for jail."

"PRUs – you're locked in class; staff have got radios – just like prison."

The impact of these prior histories on a young person's perception of education, particularly a form of education characterised by a restricted curriculum, limited contact hours and the potential for conflict with peers from other neighbourhoods, can foster a negative attitude towards the prison education offer. As with PRUs, concerns have repeatedly been raised about the breadth and suitability of educational provisions in prisons,[108] especially within Young Offender Institutions (YOI s).[109] Given that young adults serving long sentences often enter custody with poor prior educational outcomes, yet have substantial time ahead to engage in constructive and purposeful activity, it is crucial to consider their distinct position: how their past experiences shape their engagement at the outset, and how future educational opportunities in custody can be designed to improve both experiences and outcomes for this cohort.

"The atmosphere in prison education is like PRUs – boring, not stimulating enough."

"Prison education is not a good learning environment."

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103 Hart, N. (2013). What helps children in a pupil referral unit (PRU)? An exploration into the potential protective factors of a PRU as identified by children and staff. *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties*, *18*(2), 196-212.

104 Ofsted (2016). *Alternative provision: The findings from Ofsted's three-year survey of schools' use of off-site alternative provision*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a80420ce5274a2e87db8c66/Alternative_provision_findings_from_Ofsteds_threeyear_survey_of_schools_use_of_off-site_alternative_provision.doc

105 Maguire, D. (2021). *Male, Failed, Jailed Masculinities and "Revolving-Door" Imprisonment in the UK*, Palgrave Studies in Prisons and Penology. Palgrave Macmillan.

106 Perera, J. (2020). How Black Working-Class Youth are Criminalised and Excluded in the English School System. *Institute of Race Relations.* https://www.irr.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/How-Black-Working-Class-Youth-are-Criminalised-and-Excluded-in-the-English-School-System.pdf

107 Ibid.

108 Coates, S. (2016). *Unlocking Potential: A review of education in prison.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/unlocking-potential-a-review-of-education-in-prison

109 Ofsted and HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2024). *A decade of declining quality of education in young offender institutions: The systemic shortcomings that fail children.* https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/thematic-review-of-the-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-yois/a-decade-of-declining-quality-of-education-in-young-offender-institutions-the-systemic-shortcomings-that-fail-children#foreword-by-his-majestys-chief-inspector-of-education-childrens-services-and-skills

Care experience

People with experience of the care system are disproportionately represented within the prison population.[110] This overrepresentation is widely understood to reflect patterns of multiple disadvantage, including poverty, family instability and high levels of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs),[111] some of which are associated with an increased likelihood of contact with the criminal justice system, including for serious offending.[112] In the group sessions, a number of the young men referred to experiences of the care system as traumatic and marginalising. Several noted the upheaval of moving to different children's homes or foster placements and how this contributed to feelings of displacement. This can contribute to a wider sense of being let down by the state and lead to feelings of distrust or resentment towards state services that are supposed to provide support and care. For some, the cumulative effect of ongoing state intervention throughout childhood and into adulthood may generate a perception of 'no escape' from institutional control, with care, supervision and punishment being experienced as continuous and stigmatising.[113]

> *"I was 14 years of age when I got my very first custodial sentence! However, I was kicked out of home at 11 years of age and taken into local authority care. Therefore, I have been in some form of Government institution since then [...] I am going to be 37 in Nov [...] I got my IPP sentence at just turned 21 back in January 2007. I have remained incarcerated ever since"* (response to written consultation)

Both children's social services and the prison system assume responsibility for the care, supervision and, in principle, rehabilitation of individuals they are in contact with. Yet, as with the prison estate, children's social care has been subject to persistent and systemic critique. Pressures relating to funding constraints, shortages in workforce and inconsistent practice mean that children and young people in care are not always adequately supported. Ofsted inspections have repeatedly found significant failings in local authority children's services, with many judged as 'requires improvement' or 'inadequate'.[114] For individuals who later enter custody, prior experience of being taken into care or receiving sustained intervention from social services may therefore reflect not only adversity within the family home but also repeated exposure to institutional failure.

One of the focus group participants shared:

> *"I lost count of how many social workers I had, had a new social worker every six months."*

Receiving a long-term sentence

Several respondents to the written consultation described the shock of receiving a lengthy sentence as older adults - the realisation that a significant amount of their future years would now be spent in prison is a lot to cope with at any life stage. The life they had outside, their families, other relationships, their financial commitments, their hopes and plans, all put indefinitely on pause, or seemingly dashed forever.

> *"I was 43 when I came into prison and I felt like my life was over. I lost everything."* (response to written consultation)

> *"When I was sentenced, I was 40 years old, I 'joked' that when people said 'life begins at 40' I didn't realise they meant so literally. It's hard to get my head around it, even now 13 years later. Fortunately for me I don't have a family, wife, girlfriend, so it's a little easier to digest, but after many years of working hard, buying a house, cars, bikes and collecting personal effects, I have nothing."* (response to written consultation)

However, receiving a lengthy sentence as a young person can be even more difficult to comprehend, not least because often the sentence given is as long as, or longer than, their current years of age:

> *"I was 21 years old when sentenced to 21 years. It makes me sad to think I was that young, I've actually been in prison since 18 years old. I am currently 30 years old. Missing my whole youth has been tough…"* (response to written consultation)

> *"Being in prison at such a young age [18], sentenced to such a long time was difficult to say the*

110 Gooch, K., Masson, I., Owens, A., & Waddington, E. (2022). After care, after thought: The invisibility of care experienced men and women in prison. *Prison Service Journal*, *258*(9), 4-12.

111 Jahanshahi, B., Murray, K. & McVie, S. (2022). ACEs, places and inequality: Understanding the effects of adverse childhood experiences and poverty on offending in childhood. *The British Journal of Criminology*, *62*(3), 751-772.

112 Gray, P., Smithson, H. & Jump, D. (2021). *Serious youth violence and its relationship with adverse childhood experiences.* https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/627789/1/Serious%20Youth%20Violence%20Report.pdf

113 Dansey, D., Shbero, D., & John, M. (2019). Keeping secrets: How children in foster care manage stigma. *Adoption & Fostering*, 43(1), 35-45. https://doi.org/10.1177/0308575918823436

114 See, for example, Ofsted (2024). *Inspection of Havering local authority children's services.* https://files.ofsted.gov.uk/v1/file/50239788

least. To begin with, I didn't understand much about life in prison or the seriousness and impact my sentence and conviction would have on me. Furthermore, I could barely understand some of the things that were discussed at my trial, but to understand the impact this would have on my life, I'm still struggling with." (response to written consultation)

In several of the focus group sessions, the young men each shared their ages at sentencing, and the sentence received. In one group, one at a time, the young men volunteered:

"I was 18 years old when on remand, received 21 years".

"Was looking at 30 years, received 15 years".

"I was 19 years old, received 25 years".

"(no age given), hoping for 20 years or less, got 20 years".

"Jailed at 15 years old, aged 18 years received a 12 and half year sentence".

"17 years old – was looking at 12 years and then the law was changed and got 27 years."

"18 years old, looking at 25 years, got 18 years."

"17 years old, got 19 years."

"16 years old, got 20 years."

"24 years old, looking at 16 years, got 10."

"17 years old, got 24 years."

"18 years old, got 25 years."

Notwithstanding the gravity of the offences committed among the groups, these are sobering numbers. It is therefore important for staff working in courts and prisons to be aware of the potential impacts and effects of both anticipating such a lengthy sentence and then receiving it. The disclosures above, from some who were not yet old enough to vote, show the calculations they were attempting to make ahead of the courts' decisions – what they were 'looking at' versus what they received, and in this group, 10 years seemed like a small number. A consistent theme that emerged across the group discussions was the specificity of the life stage of young adults and the lack of significance placed on this by the criminal legal system at sentencing – *"outside you can't get a car rental until you are 25, but you can get a 35-year stretch at 18".*

The often-drawn-out legal processes were described both in terms of the trials themselves and the prison backdrop whilst being held on remand. They would be woken up early for long journeys to court. They would arrive back to the jail late and then *"go again tomorrow*". Participants described being out of their depth, being young and confused, feeling at a loss in how to meet the expectations from lawyers, juries and judges. They would be tired, obviously anxious about the potential outcome, and feeling the weight of the presence of family members (theirs and the victims) in court.

"We don't know what is happening, but what is very clear is we are guilty until proven innocent".

"They don't explain the process, we are 16, 17, 18 years of age and we have to sit still in court for hours/days with all this legal speak around us."

"People are moving up and down in the court, signs of things going on, but I haven't got a clue what is happening"

"We were so young, we just didn't understand what they were saying. They were able to blag us off."

"If you don't know the law, you just get exploited."

"How do they expect us to show remorse in court, as a young person? We're just trying to keep it together, stay looking like we are taking it seriously, trying to keep awake, keep following everything".

These accounts echo previous research which has noted that 'episodes of amnesia were common, as were feelings of paralysis, numbness, surrealism'.[115] The stage of neurological development is particularly relevant here. For young people and young adults, the scale and permanence of what is at stake during the trial may be extremely difficult to grasp, with limited capacity to fully comprehend the long-term consequences.[116]

115 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan. Page 81.

116 Sentencing Council (2024). *Miscellaneous amendments to sentencing guidelines: Consultation 2024* https://sentencingcouncil.org.uk/publications/item/miscellaneous-amendments-to-sentencing-guidelines-consultation-2024/

Similar feelings of incomprehension were noted when the long sentence was handed down:

> *"They gave me 24 years, got back to the jail and the staff didn't even ask me anything – boys on the wing came to check on me, but not the staff".*

As we might expect from a diverse group, on being sentenced for a substantial term, there were a range of reactions reported. It was described as *"mad innit"* – the reality of such a large sentence is difficult to grasp. One of the young men reflected on expecting 30 years, but receiving half of that, leading to *"mixed emotions"* and believing he should be feeling *"grateful"*. Some similarly compared the length of their sentence to others', reminding themselves that it was always possible to get lengthier sentences and if someone could do a 30-year term, they would be able to do 20 years, so they took a pragmatic approach – "*it's possible to do".*

> *"How can I be sad about 18 years when my neighbour on the wing got 32? They're looking at us like we've got baby bird."*

> *"They were cheering us when we got back to the wing, saying 'you only got 17'!"*

There was also an acceptance of the sentence, that it was justice for what they had done, but this combined with a regret that whilst they were rightly receiving punishment, they were now useless to people on the outside.

Others describe shock:

> *"I was 18 years old, I thought I might get 18 months – no, got 18 years!"*

> *"I was 19, looking at 25 years… shocked… not real… just a number."*

> *"I'm doing more years in jail than I've done outside… it don't really make sense."*

> *"Couldn't grasp the time really."*

> *"Sentencing didn't sink it. It was like fake – I figured out the age I'd be out and it didn't feel real."*

> *"One day is feeling like ten years – how am I going to do this whole stretch?"*

Others did not necessarily process the sentence early on. They had in some cases spent significant time on remand before conviction and sentencing or had been in prison for shorter terms for other offences previously. As such, the reality of the long-term sentence was not realised until sometime after. Some went through appeal processes, so did not fully 'accept' the sentence until all those avenues had been explored. Others did not begin to feel the extended length of the sentence until people around them were being released. One participant shared: *"Hit me like two years down the line".*

On the other hand, one of the participants reflected on the real dangers they faced on the outside, and being grateful to be in prison for an extended period – *"it's better for me in here"* – acknowledging the serious risk to their life of being out. The same participant also saw the long-term sentence as an opportunity to gain new skills and potentially begin a meaningful educational journey:

> *"Every school I've been to, I got kicked out, they can't kick me out of here – so going to use the time."*

Coping with a long-term sentence

Most of the young men who contributed to the in-person consultation were in the early stages of a long sentence, were almost all 25 years and under and many were currently housed in establishments for young adults.[117] As such, they mostly reflected on how they coped in this initial period, either shortly after receiving the sentence, or as they began, or attempted to begin, 'doing their time'. They shared what was very difficult in this period, the types of approaches they took to alleviate those difficulties, and gave suggestions and recommendations for what would help if available.

As noted earlier, several focus group contributors had previously spent time in Young Offenders Institutions for less serious offences and had returned home after release. They were often held alongside other young people serving shorter-term sentences or had lived in communities where peers cycled in and out of custody. In this context, their imprisonment had not initially felt like a disruption to youth or an abnormal stage of life. However, once the reality of the long sentence sunk in, they confronted challenges that went far beyond the typical difficulties faced by young people in custody.

117 The group in HMP Swaleside also included someone who was 27. He had been sentenced as a young adult and now worked as a young adult representative in the prison.

Coping with the shock of the sentence

Group members described a range of coping strategies used in the early stages of imprisonment, often acknowledging in hindsight that these approaches were neither sustainable nor desirable in the long-term.[118] However, at the time, such strategies functioned as immediate ways of either avoiding or intensely confronting the overwhelming reality of the lengthy sentences they were facing.

> *"Stayed in bed for weeks, didn't want to speak to anyone."*
>
> *"Smoking [cannabis] helped at first, but later realised you can only run [from your problems] for so long."*
>
> *"It might sound funny, but 'a good fight' felt like it helped, released some of the tension!"*
>
> *"All that violence is just a distraction."*
>
> *"Being convicted at such a young age was heart-breaking - I would not come out of my room for months at a time, I'd barely be able to do the most basic things such as eat or shower. Also, the 23 hr COVID bang up didn't help"* *Female UID 405*

These types of coping strategies could be detrimental to the prisoners themselves, to the running of the prison regime or have negative consequences for other prisoners and staff. It is therefore important to recognise the need for young people to process the reality of a long sentence, particularly given that many will have already faced significant trauma, including trauma associated with the offence itself.[119] Several young men discussed developing more constructive coping strategies, often after an initial period of avoidance or resistance. These included practicing self-discipline through exercise, making conscious choices about the food they were eating and adopting a more positive mindset, supported by reading, listening to or creating music and other creative activities. Some participants noted that prison staff would consider initiating an Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) process if they believed a prisoner was struggling to cope and might be at risk of harming themselves. A more proactive approach could, however, be beneficial. For example, ensuring priority access to gym sessions, food parcels, self-cook facilities and other resources that support healthy and constructive coping could improve early adjustment and wellbeing.

Relationships

Family

The reality that the *"best years of their lives"* would now be spent behind bars was shared, but many suggested they were more concerned with the effects of the sentence on their loved ones, than they were with the impact on themselves.

> *"I wasn't bothered about me, but I got two girls."*
>
> *"My way of coping is I don't think about anything. I'm not living in here, I'm just existing. My life is with my children and family."* (response to written consultation)

Maintaining family relationships is known to be a key protective factor for in-prison wellbeing, and post-release outcomes.[120] Facing the early stages of a lengthy sentence as a young person can add additional challenges around navigating existing family relationships over and above what would be experienced on a shorter sentence. The effect of the sentence on family members was discussed in the focus groups, including a feeling of powerlessness in their ability to support and protect family members, such as mothers and siblings - *"you're on the side lines and have to watch people".* They often sought to protect their families from the perceived burden of worrying about how they were coping in prison. They discussed focusing on events on the outside during phone calls and minimising any difficulties they might be experiencing inside. One participant shared the internal battles they have when contacting their loved ones and how he tried to hide his struggles so that his mother wouldn't worry:

> *"I hop on the phone to mum and try to put on a good voice but she can tell…then there's pain in her voice."*

That said, all of the groups discussed the importance of as much family contact as possible, through visits and phone and video calls. These family connections helped maintain dignity, and a sense of an alternative normality that was not exclusively tied to their identity as a 'long-termer' in prison.

118 Wright, S., Crewe, B., & Hulley, S. (2017). Suppression, denial, sublimation: Defending against the initial pains of very long life sentences. *Theoretical Criminology*, 21(2), 225–246. https://doi.org/10.1177/1362480616643581

119 Crewe, B., Hulley, S. and Wright, S. (2020). *Life imprisonment from young adulthood: Adaptation, identity and time.* Palgrave Macmillan.

120 Farmer, M. (2017). *The importance of strengthening prisoners' family ties to prevent reoffending and reduce intergenerational crime.* Ministry of Justice.

"For young people like me in custody, there's no support in place, and the prison system could do much more to increase support in establishing family contact and family ties. Besides the ACCT there's nothing to help us adjust to such long sentences. We're monitored for the first few weeks then the officers forget it even happened." (response to written consultation)

"Family contact keeps you strong."

"Family is my humanity".

"I disassociate when I don't see my family."

"We need conjugal visits. They tell us to maintain family contact, but we can't build proper relationships."

"Some prisons have family units where you can make meals together, that stuff is important."

In one of the focus groups, the men discussed the impact their offences had had on their relationships with loved ones, describing periods of emotional distance and breakdown. Several spoke about how family members' perceptions of them had fundamentally shifted following the offence, with one man recalling:

"I've seen fear in my family since the offence. I went to hug my dad on a visit and he flinched – that was a crazy moment."

Others described the burden of protecting family members from the reality of their actions, even at the cost of honesty and emotional closeness:

"My mum still thinks it wasn't me. I don't want her thinking of me like that – I'll always deny it to her."

For some, entrenched and difficult relationships with the authorities, including a reluctance to speak to the police, created further strain and led to periods of enforced separation:

"My mum was crying on the phone trying to get me to snitch. I had to cut contact with her for a few months."

These accounts illustrate how long sentences can reshape family relationships in complex and painful ways, marked by fear, denial and loss. For some young men the offence and ensuing sentence can lead to a shift in identity as they have to come to understand themselves through the altered gaze of family members, reshaping how they position themselves as sons, brothers and family members over time.

Peers

Others reflected on being aware of their peers outside growing up and moving through typical life transitions. Friends were changing their lives and going to university or getting full time jobs, and they could not speak to them regularly as they might have been able to previously as they now had schedules and responsibilities and different mindsets. This was difficult to cope with, both as some of their support networks were no longer accessible, and as a reminder of the potential opportunities they were missing. As highlighted above, many discussed not wanting to burden family, so this loss of outside peer support was significant.

"At the beginning, you still have your girlfriend and friends, but over time: 2-4 years down the line, there's only your mum left."

"The only letters you get now are nickings [disciplinary reports]*."*

There was also a recognition that building networks would now be difficult,

"*When we're serving a double-digit sentence, the only people we know are in here, we are not making new friends or contacts outside like we would if we weren't in jail."*

Nonetheless, developing and maintaining positive peer relationships in prison was seen as important for wellbeing, support and advice. Across the groups, barriers to positive peer relationships were highlighted within the context of their long sentences. In the youth estate, serving alongside young adults on shorter sentences was incredibly challenging.

"I am on trial for M [murder] and my cellmate who was looking at two years is crying 'my missus is going to leave me!'"

"Other prisoners don't care – they are going home next month. They've got different motivations."

There was also the tension around building friendships with people who might be going home soon and a desire to either not have cellmates at all or to at least not have short-term 'casual' cellmates. Concerns around potential conflict with 'non-associates' were raised, both as limiting opportunities for education and

other purposeful activity, but also as affecting the ability to 'relax' and build positive relationships. Many spoke of being constantly on alert and expecting violence on a daily basis, from peers and sometimes officers.[121] These concerns were mainly raised within the YOI settings. Those who were further along their sentence or hoping to be transferred to prisons outside of their local area described a willingness to put conflict behind them, and that mixing of age groups in adult or higher category prisons made this more possible. They also saw the benefit of older mentors, especially those that were also doing long sentences. They were seen as role models and exemplars of how it was possible to do a long sentence, but also expert sources of information in terms of prison processes, resources they were eligible for and how to get these.

> *"Having some elders around makes people grow up."*

> *"Good influences on the wing got me out of the YO mentality."*

Either through external programmes and interventions or through a consideration of the most appropriate institutional settings for young adults with lengthy sentences, the focus groups recommended access to mentors and role models with lived experience. We spoke with a small number of older adults in HMP Frankland and HMP/YOI Isis, who similarly raised the benefits of 'reverse mentoring' where they learned from younger adults who were closer to life outside and its more recent developments.

Staff

For all prisoners, relationships with prison staff are a key determinant to the nature of their experience.[122] Positive relationships can build trust, result in less violence and lead to more uptake of programmes and interventions.[123] Given the common prior experiences of institutions and with state professionals highlighted above, children and young people serving long sentences may enter custody already predisposed to distrust those who tasked with caring for them in prison. The parallels between earlier experiences of state intervention and the prison environment are striking, reinforcing perceptions of surveillance and control.

> *"Prison tends to treat people like children and has an infantilising effect on peoples' behaviour: prison uniform = school uniform, canteen = tuck shop, food = school meals, rules about 'forbidding' rather than 'expecting' levels of behaviour, told when to eat, sleep, wash."* (response to written consultation)

> *"The way they talk to us…It's like school but shouldn't be like school…we're all grown."*

> *"Age matters because whether you're outside or inside you mature with age. The issue with maturing in prison is that it is harder to transition into a man and move forward, you're still being treated the same as when you were younger by all staff, governors, policies so you feel stuck when trying to transition and you can't just take yourself out of certain scenarios because you can't leave your environment and the culture has been set in that environment."* (response to written consultation)

There was an acknowledgement that there were 'good' staff, typified by showing respect through their communications, being 'calm' and being reliable. On the other hand, there was a strong critique of (sometimes younger,) inexperienced staff who the participants described as tending to show less respect and using a communication style that created or escalated issues. One group member reflected on what he described as the bad attitude of officers.

> *"They work here; we live here… there should be more respect... they talk to you like we are animals."*

In line with many HMIP reports, the men called for an improvement in the staffing levels, so full regimes would be able to operate.[124] More specifically, there was also a focus on raising awareness of the unique circumstances of young adults serving long sentences and better training for staff. Coming into prison on a long sentence so young can cause a loss of hope and the men suggested prisons need to consider new ways to introduce initiatives to address loss of hope, and to help staff understand what young adults in this situation will be going through, so they can communicate better with those affected. This included more timely and robust systems of communication around changes that might affect the young adults' sentences or opportunities to be transferred to other prisons (for example).

> *"One day I was just re-categorised, and found out ages after".*

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121 O'Rourke, R. (2022). *The nature and impact of trauma in young adult prisoners: Screening for trauma and exploring the past and present experiences* (Doctoral dissertation, Nottingham Trent University). Retrieved from https://irep.ntu.ac.uk/id/eprint/47354/1/Rachel%20O%27Rourke%202022.pdf

122 Crewe, B. (2011). Soft power in prison: Implications for staff–prisoner relationships, liberty and legitimacy. *European Journal of Criminology*, *8*(6), 455-468.

123 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2025). *Building trust: the importance of positive relationships in young offender institutions: A thematic review by HM Chief Inspector of Prisons.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/building-trust-the-importance-of-positive-relationships-in-young-offender-institutions/

124 HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for England and Wales (2025). *Annual Report, 2024-25.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/annual-report-2024-25/

Prison facilities

The in-person consultations took place in Category C young adult prisons and Category A and B adult prisons, however, many of the young adults consulted had previously spent time in YOIs or in other local or higher-category establishments. A common theme emerged and participants frequently compared the perceived advantages and disadvantages of different types of institutions for young adults serving long sentences. These comparisons often formed part of broader discussions about the facilities available across different prisons and how these differences could affect their ability to cope with long periods in prison or to progress positively through their sentence.

Negative evaluations of YOIs focused somewhat on the atmosphere of violence and lack of maturity of the people held there, with many noting their primary concern was personal safety.[125]

> *"You can tell if someone spent time in a YOI, they've got a much shorter fuse and are always ready for violence."*
>
> *"Feltham just trained me not to show fear. I got into a mentality of fighting anyone just so no one thought I was weak. That shapes your life."*
>
> *"You just can't let things slide."*
>
> *"Whereas I might just turn and walk away from some drama, the boys who have been in YOIs just react different. They would never walk away."*
>
> *"At 16-17 you're just absorbing everything around you, you start to think it's normal."*
>
> *"Can't remember meeting one person that's mature in YOI."*
>
> *"Feels like school, like a youth club."*

Some young adults felt that at least part of the responsibility for their behaviour lay with the prison environment itself. In their view, young adults are often put in positions where 'kicking off' feels inevitable, either because people on short, fixed-term sentences provoke conflict or because the prison environment brings them into unavoidable contact with people with negative mindsets. There was agreement that surroundings have a powerful influence on behaviour, noting that violence occurs '*every single day*' as a consequence of the environment.

However, some also shared positive reflections from their time in YOIs, noting there were more interventions, more visits and a wider range of activities available compared with many young adult prisons. Despite this, there was no desire to return to a YOI. Instead, participants expressed a preference to move to an adult prison, where they felt the atmosphere would be different and relationships with peers and staff could be more positive.

> "[in an adult prison you can] *sit down in a cell, have a cup of tea, sit down and talk"*
>
> *"You learn from people who are more mature."*
>
> *"Belmarsh knows how to deal with lifers"*

There was clear consensus across all the discussions that there is a lack of consistency of provision for young adults in different prisons. Whether this is due to security category, type of prison (HMP or YOI), prison contracts (meaning public prisons or private prisons) or physical facilities in different institutions, experience of these inconsistencies led to prisons being categorised by the young men themselves as generally 'good or bad jails'.

> *"Given how ill-equipped, unfit for purpose the whole system is, with one size fits all approach that fails to take in any factor properly, means that adjusting/coping with a long-term sentence becomes impossible, especially given the massive disparity between prisons and inconsistencies and lack of consistency even in prisons within the same category and the same in lower category. The only thing in common is nothing and plenty of it, so if you 'adapt' to one approach/regime/facilities at one prison, on transfer it will be completely different and turn your life upside down and back to square one, unsettled, no routine etc. […] The prison system is not equipped to hold different ages and does not cater for them, but it's not just age not catered for, sentence length, race, religion, many things are not catered for." (*response to written consultation*)*

Whatever the prison type, certain features and facilities were identified as very important for long-serving young adults. These features were highlighted as essential for coping with the day-to-day experience, but

125 Gooch, K. (2019). 'Kidulthood': Ethnography, juvenile prison violence and the transition from 'boys' to 'men'. *Criminology & Criminal Justice,* 19(1), 80–97. https://doi.org/10.1177/1748895817741519

also with enabling progression through the sentence. Food and independent cooking facilities were seen as important for health and wellbeing and also for cultivating a positive self-identity. Having some measure of agency or control over what food they ate, given many would be spending a large proportion of their life in prison, was agreed to be highly valuable.[126] Reviewing prison rules around the amount of money that can be spent on canteen, upgrading cooking facilities (such as stoves and hotplates) and improving family visit food were recommendations to achieve this.

Lack of regular access to exercise facilities, including the gym and on-wing equipment for long serving prisoners, was consistently raised across the groups as an area of frustration. Here, comparisons of gym availability across different institutions were highlighted, with some prisons only facilitating gym twice a week at the most, and others succeeding to arrange gym five nights a week.

> *"I guess the other thing that prison does is make you painfully aware of your mortality - at any age. Life is slipping through my fingers like grains of sand. How much life will be left in the hourglass when I leave? How can I claw some of those grains back? Those kind of questions undoubtedly make those who contemplate them much more health conscious. I want to keep myself in the best condition I can not only so that I can live life more fully when I finally get out, but so that I can slow the clock on the ageing process itself. For us young, early to prison lifers, the onset of hair loss - as just one example - is a particularly bitter reminder that our youth has been frittered away at the hands of the state, a visible maker of time, and fading glory - 'they took my life, and now they're taking my hair!' I mean it's funny, silly, whimsical, but also bloody tragic. I've lost count of how many anti-aging treatments lifers have pledged to buy on release."* (response to written consultation)

Similarly, the availability of technology (or lack of) was identified as another factor that impacted young adults' ability to cope with a long sentence. The in-cell technology available in some prisons made accessing prison systems more straightforward, communicating with friends and family outside more seamless and 'normal', and provided entertainment or learning through films, games and podcasts. However, there were some complaints around the media on laptops being dated – if what they were being presented with now was already old and out-of-date – how were they expected to keep up with the fast pace of technological change that is happening outside whilst they serve their sentence?

Purposeful activity

Given their status as young adults and the prevalence of negative prior experiences with education among this group, the formal offer in prison education departments was discussed at length across all of the groups. There was a strong desire for educational opportunities. In young adult prisons with heavily restricted regimes due to managing high numbers of 'non-associates' through the practice of 'keep-aparts' ,[127] access to formal education was limited.[128] In one prison, young adults were only able to access education twice a week. This was critiqued as too limited (in terms of access), but there was a wider critique of the very small range of courses generally on offer and the atmosphere within these spaces – "*Prison education is not a good learning environment"*. Beyond basic Maths and English courses, the young men suggested a wider range of courses and programmes that could lead to qualifications that are recognised on the outside or could help with setting up their own business on their eventual release. In one of the prisons, a multi-skills course had recently been discontinued due to contractual and funding issues. The young adults noted that this course which taught basic training in plumbing, electrical work and other construction skills was well suited to their needs, not least because it provided a practical, hands-on way of learning in contrast to conventional classroom-based provision. The loss of the course was experienced as emblematic of the inconsistent nature of education and training opportunities across the prison estate, which was a significant source of frustration for the men.

Eligibility for funding for higher level qualifications being in the final six years of a sentence was seen to be too far away for young adults on very long sentences. There was therefore frustration with the priority given to prisoners on shorter sentences or those towards the end of their sentences.

> *"I've been in jail six years; I've been asking to do an engineering course since I came in. I've never had an induction and never been to education."*

Beyond the formal education offer, participants noted areas of good practice in relation to some interventions and courses they had taken part in, sometimes in higher category or adult prisons. This included a therapeutic course with horses, a podcast course, music courses and mentoring programmes led by men with lived

126 Parsons, J. M. (2020). Making time for food when 'doing time'; how enhanced status prisoners counter the indignity of prison foodways. *Appetite*, 146, 104507. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appet.2019.104507

127 These lists seek to separate individuals or groups who, if allowed to mix, risk becoming violent. For further information, see HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2024): https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/news/hmyoi-werrington-children-feeling-unsafe-in-a-violent-environment/

128 HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2020). *Separation of children in young offender institutions.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/separation-of-children-in-young-offender-institutions/

experienced of prison. However, there was again a reference to the inconsistencies around these offers, and sometimes the unreliability of said courses – you could start a course and then it is cancelled, or you move prisons and have to repeat a course as there is no record of it being completed.

The lack of opportunities for work better suited to long-term young adults was highlighted. It was suggested that allocating the 'best' (or any) jobs should not be a matter of officer discretion. Instead, long termers should be prioritised for jobs.

> *"It's more beneficial for a long-termer to have a functional job, rather than just cleaning the wing."*

> *"I look at people and just think 'he's going to mentally cook, mopping the floor for 10 years'."*

Finally, group members highlighted the unpredictability of the prison regime as a significant barrier to accessing relationships, facilities and purposeful activity. Regime changes were experienced as arbitrary and disruptive, undermining any sense of routine or stability. Religion was described as particularly important for many focus group members, however, some reported that changes to the regime disproportionately impacted those of certain faiths. In one prison, changes to gym timetabling resulted in sessions being scheduled on Fridays, directly clashing with Friday prayers. This left these individuals feeling compelled to choose between praying and accessing the gym, both of which they felt were essential to their wellbeing.

Many also reflected that the practice of managing risk through 'keep-aparts' or 'non-associates' was problematic. While this was recognised as a necessary measure for safety in principle, it was widely viewed as inconsistently applied and ultimately ineffective. In one group, young adults described being unable to access courses or being abruptly removed from activities when a non-associate entered the prison or was allocated a place on the same programme. At the same time, they reported routinely encountering the same individual during free-flow periods or in the visits hall. As such, the men questioned the rationale of a system that failed to prevent contact in practice, yet restricted access to education or training, with detrimental consequences for their progression and wellbeing.

The young adults consulted in HMP Frankland were further on in their sentences. Not only did they agree that 'keep-aparts' were rarely effective, but they also suggested this was not the most effective means of managing conflict. Instead, they noted that mediation is often more effective, reflecting what they described as an informal process that frequently occurs in practice between prisoners and groups of prisoners. This typically begins with a shared 'truce', driven by a shared recognition that sustaining the conflict will make the experience of custody yet more difficult. Over time, the men noted that the original issue often loses significance. That being said, the men in Frankland noted that this form of resolution may be more achievable in adult prisons, where there is a wider range of ages and a higher proportion of long-serving prisoners. In contrast, in establishments holding predominantly young adults on shorter sentences, many of whom carry ongoing conflicts linked to outside associations, such approaches may be more challenging. Within this context, some young adults expressed a desire to transfer to the adult estate as early as possible, viewing it as an environment in which conflict may be easier to move beyond. They were keen to stress this should not be seen as an endorsement of adult prisons being more suitable for young adults. Rather, it highlights the stresses caused in environments with high numbers of young people with complex and overlapping non-associate requirements, and points to the potential of mediation-based approaches within regimes holding young adults.

Race, ethnicity, religion

Across all the stages of the long-term sentence, race, ethnicity and religion featured strongly. The significant and disproportionately high rates of imprisonment of racially minoritised young adults is well established,[129] as is the proportion of racially minoritised young adults serving long sentences.[130] The significance of Joint Enterprise convictions and the racialised components of the associated 'gang' narrative on both convictions and sentencing is known to be a contributing factor in the increasing number of young adults serving very lengthy sentences.[131]

The groups consulted were representative of the statistics: there were a small number of white young adults who took part, but the majority were Black and then South Asian participants. They talked about the ways race and racism had positioned them. They discussed representations in the media (including social media) that they are aware of during and after trials. There would be notoriety in the prison as a result of TikTok videos, but also a pervasive narrative about young adults in their situation generally that considers them to be "animals".

129 The Lammy Review (2017). *An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System*.

130 Ministry of Justice (2020). Freedom of Information request 201117009, 15 December 2020, available at: https://bit.ly/U25-lifers-15-plus

131 Williams, P., & Clarke, B. (2016). *Dangerous associations: Joint enterprise, gangs and racism.* Centre for Crime and Justice Studies, 25. See also HM Chief Inspector of Prisons (2022). *The experiences of adult black male prisoners and black prison staff.* https://hmiprisons.justiceinspectorates.gov.uk/hmipris_reports/the-experiences-of-adult-black-male-prisoners-and-black-prison-staff/

"People don't know the full story – 'it's not what people think' – they wouldn't be able to imagine."

There were explicit and implicit impacts of 'gang' narrative described in their experiences in court. One group member discussed his conviction under the Joint Enterprise doctrine, when he and his family members were presumed to be a 'gang'. In another group, a young adult shared his experience of being on remand awaiting trial and meeting another young man who had been convicted under Joint Enterprise,; creating a sense that his own trial would be conducted in a fair manner.

"They see a group of black boys with dreads or plaits and just instantly judge us."

"In court – judge was racist, prosecution create a story around the offence – everything is around a gang narrative, 'gang life', look at everything as one thing – 'it's a gang'."

Beyond sentencing itself, the groups discussed the significance of race in shaping their experiences of prison when serving long sentences. One young Black man, now held in a prison in the North of England, reflected on how difficult local prisons in London, such as Pentonville, had been, but noted that at least the environment felt familiar to racially minoritised young people. The population, and even the staff, were more diverse, with local accents and backgrounds that mirrored their own. This created a sense of being less disconnected from life outside. In contrast, in the northern prison, although the regime felt more settled and the facilities were better, he and others were far more conscious of their minority status. They described experiencing clear racial microaggressions from staff, while also acknowledging that these did not necessarily stem from explicitly racist intent. As one participant put it: *"One staff member said the first time she had seen a Black person was in this prison".*

*"I spoke to staff member who was from Kent. He had never seen so many Black people, until he came to work [*here*]. How do you think he's going to think? He just thinks Black kids are bad."*

These staff perceptions of difference were frequently described by group members as being bound up with racialised constructions of 'risk'.[132] A number of the men relayed experiences of not being able to secure trusted jobs (as these were a matter of staff discretion) or not being trusted to do that job if they did secure it. Examples were given of an older Black prisoner being given a job as a wing painter, but hardly ever being unlocked to do the job. This group stated most racially minoritised young adults faced significant barriers in securing any job, much less a trusted job.

Group members also described the intersection of race and religion as shaping the experiences of Black, Muslim young adults serving long sentences. Group members reported that concerns were expressed by staff about there being "too many" Muslim young adults on the same wing. In addition, Friday prayers were described as being framed by staff as a privilege that could be withdrawn in response to behavioural infractions. Many felt Muslim young adults were subject to heighted scrutiny, with their racial and religious identities implicitly linked to perceptions of risk.[133] This contributed to a sense that their behaviour was more closely monitored, which impacted on the level to which they trusted staff and felt able to progress in their sentence.

Imagined Futures – navigating the sentence

Most of the young adults we consulted were at the early stages of the sentence. As such, they were predominantly focused on progressing through their sentence, rather than imagining what they might do or where they might be when their time in prison comes to an end. There were discussions about achieving relevant skills and qualifications that could help with employment, or with starting a business when they would be released, and many sought advice (where available) from role models who had navigated life after a life sentence (PRT arranged for such guest speakers to meet with some of the groups), and this gave hope. However, more urgently, the young men were critiquing the approaches to progression in the prison system generally, and often in the establishment they were currently residing in.

Many felt that progression does not happen in a fair way*: "Not letting me progress the way I want to."* For those in young adult prisons there were frustrations at being surrounded by younger, less mature prisoners, which impacted on regimes and opportunities (as discussed above) and the general atmosphere, and this was holding them back. Some felt they were being held back to guide younger prisoners, which they saw as unfair: *"I'm not their dad."*

There was further discussion of the lack of access to programmes and courses, but in this case as a barrier

132 See: Earle, R., & Phillips, C. (2013). "Muslim is the New Black" New Ethnicities and New Essentialisms in the Prison. *Race and Justice*, *3*(2), 114-129;The Lammy Review (2017). *An independent review into the treatment of, and outcomes for, Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic individuals in the Criminal Justice System;* Warr, J. (2020). 'Always gotta be two mans': Lifers, risk, rehabilitation, and narrative labour, *Punishment & Society*, 22(1): 28-47; and Warr, J. (2023). Whitening Black Men: Narrative Labour and the Scriptural Economics of Risk and Rehabilitation, *British Journal of Criminology,* 63(5): 1091-1107.

133 See, for example, Liebling, A. and Williams, R. (2023). Do prisons cause radicalization? Order, leadership, political charge and violence in two maximum security prisons, *British Journal of Criminology*, 63(1): 97-114.

to progression. They believed that interventions are focused on the short-termers who are leaving and need to achieve actions on their sentence plans. For the longer serving prisoner in the early stages, sentence plans were described as vague and unhelpful.

> *"They only state 'maintain enhanced status and have a job'."*
>
> *"They are not individualised and feel 'copied and pasted'."*
>
> *"Would be good for someone to sit down and ask what you want to do with your future and help come up with a plan."*

They were aware that what they saw as the most useful courses were not available until the last few years of their sentence. There was little that was meaningful to do before then and by the time they did reach that stage of their sentence (after spending so long in prison) there would need to be much more significant 'resettlement' than is offered by the current Cat-D policy.

They suggested a staged approach for long-termers, as opposed to 'behave enough now' not to get adjudications and obtain enhanced status, and all the 'good stuff' is available in the last 5 years, which is little use to a young person serving 25 years. They advocated for a meaningful plan with achievable, useful milestones of genuine progression. A long-term vision, but with incremental steps, guaranteed opportunities and support.

As previously highlighted, many young adult prisoners wanted to be moved to adult establishments or even higher category prisons where the facilities and regimes were 'better'. Others sought a move to a prison further away from the city where they from, so they could begin to do the sentence without looking over their shoulder for associates of non-associates, and progress away from the "gang lifestyle". Many also advocated for greater access to role models within and across the prison estate and they also aspired to 'give back' by eventually supporting others in the same position they were in now. There was an appetite for being involved in progressive programmes they had glimpsed or heard about in other prisons. Yet, these hopes coexist with deep uncertainty and fear. In one of the focus groups, one of the men posed the question "what is everyone's biggest fear for release?". The responses were:

> *"Another sentence."*
>
> *"Recall."*
>
> *"Mum and dad not living that long."*
>
> *"That I'll die before getting out."*

For some, the imagined future is less about opportunity and more about survival, shaped by the constant awareness that release is distant, uncertain and vulnerable to forces beyond their control.

Conclusion

This report has documented the profound challenges faced by young adults serving long prison sentences. Their experiences are shaped not only by the severity and duration of their sentences, but by the life stage at which they received their punishment and the cumulative effects of earlier contact with state institutions. Building on previous research, the accounts presented here reveal that early coping strategies are often characterised by withdrawal, numbing, avoidance or violence, reflecting both the overwhelming nature of the sentence and the absence of tailored support during this adjustment period. These responses need to be understood in the context of the prior experiences common among this cohort, including exclusion from mainstream education, being in local authority care, and repeated encounters with state institutions that are experienced as punitive rather than supportive. Prison was frequently perceived as a continuation of earlier trajectories, reinforcing mistrust and limiting engagement with support.

Relationships emerged as central to how young adults navigated long sentences, both as a source of resilience but also as a source of profound loss. Family contact sustained hope and humanity, yet the offence and sentence often fundamentally altered family dynamics. For some, this included fear, denial and the breakdown of family relationships. Many of the young men had to renegotiate their sense of self through the changed perceptions of those closest to them, acutely aware of the weight of stigma and shame brought about by the sentence. Peer relationships inside prison were complex and often shaped by institutional context. Many young adults serving long sentences struggled to find stability in environments dominated by short-term prisoners and spending time around older, long-term prisoners was viewed as positive, particularly because it created opportunities for guidance and mentoring.

Across all of the consultation groups, the role of staff and institutional culture was critical. Where staff were perceived as respectful and consistent, relationships improved and young adults were better able to engage with regimes and support. However, many accounts reflected a lack of understanding among staff of the specific emotional and developmental impact of serving a long sentence at a young age. For those from racially minoritised groups, particularly Black and Muslim men, these challenges were compounded by racialised assumptions of risk, gang narratives and heightened scrutiny which shaped their experiences of sentencing, relationships with staff and daily life in custody.

The findings highlight a systemic failure to adequately recognise and respond to the specific needs of young adults serving long sentences. A lack of a coherent framework that acknowledges the life course and development needs of this cohort means many struggle to cope with their sentence. Yet the focus groups also revealed significant resilience among this group. Many expressed a strong desire for education, meaningful work, mentoring and other opportunities that would allow them to contribute positively to prison life, both for their own development and to support others.

This consultation has indicated the need for a more coherent, age and trauma-informed approach to the treatment of young adults serving long sentences. Such an approach must recognise the impact of sentence length and life stage and provide prisons with concrete ways of supporting young adults through long sentences. It must also acknowledge the central role of relationships, purposeful activity and agency in enabling young adults to cope with, and make sense of, long periods of imprisonment. The recommendations that follow are directly grounded in the accounts shared in this report and are intended to address these gaps by supporting more legitimate regimes and better long-term outcomes for young adults serving long sentences.

Recommendations

1. **HMPPS should implement a policy framework for long-term prisoners, highlighting the distinct needs of those in different age groups.**

The policy framework should equip prison management and staff with an in-depth understanding of the challenges associated with serving a long sentence at different stages of the life course, including in relation to risk levels, progression, family contact and purposeful activity.

2. **HMPPS should provide age- and trauma-informed training for all staff working with young adults serving long sentences.**

This should equip staff with an understanding of the common prior life experiences of this cohort, including exposure to trauma, the care system, school exclusion, racism and multiple disadvantage, and how these experiences may shape behaviour and relationships in custody. It should also develop staff's racial and cultural literacy, supporting culturally competent and anti-racist practice. It should also include practical guidance on communicating effectively with young adults and working appropriately with neurodiverse individuals. People with lived experience of serving long sentences should be involved in the design and delivery of this training.

3. **HMPPS should develop a 'staged' approach to sentence management for young adults serving long sentences in order to enable them to feel actively engaged in progressing through their sentence.**

This should include an individualised and manageable plan with clear, achievable goals, meaningful milestones and genuine opportunities for progression at different stages of the sentence. Young adults serving long sentences, people with lived experience and other relevant stakeholders should be centrally involved in the design and ongoing review of this approach.

4. **HMPPS should review prison education contracts to ensure young adults serving long sentences have access to meaningful education and training opportunities.**

This review should prioritise the expansion of creative, practical, vocational and therapeutic opportunities aimed at the specific neurological and developmental needs of this group. Education and training opportunities should be designed to support long-term engagement and skill development over the course of a long sentence.

5. **HMPPS should develop a Partners in Progress strategy to strengthen and formalise the role of supportive relationships in the lives of young adults serving long sentences.**

This strategy should support prisons to review and expand their use of both formal and informal peer-based support, including mentors, peer workers, prison visitors and befriending schemes. In particular, young adults serving long sentences should have regular access to mentors who can offer guidance and emotional support, including older prisoners serving long sentences and people with lived experience of long sentences who are now living in the community.

6. **Prison governors should consult with prisoners to consider alternative methods of dealing with conflict resolution, to allow for regimes to be less governed by 'keep-aparts'.**

This should involve learning from examples of good practice across the prison estate and the youth custody estate and should consider the needs and views of young adults serving long sentences.

7. **Prison governors in prisons holding young adults serving long sentences should prioritise access to facilities which contribute to healthy, constructive coping and meaningful expressions of self-identity.**

This should include reliable access to self-cook, exercise facilities and other resources that promote physical health, emotional regulation and a sense of autonomy. Given the importance of routine and stability for those serving long sentences, changes to regimes that affect access to these facilities should be minimised wherever possible. Where changes are unavoidable, they should be communicated clearly and in a timely manner, with consideration given to the impact such disruptions can have on young adults' wellbeing and ability to cope.

8. **The government should remove restrictions which prevent prisoners accessing funding for higher education based on their sentence stage, particularly with young adults in mind.**

Opportunities to engage in higher education are widely viewed by young adults as a meaningful and constructive way of spending time in custody. Restricting access to funding until the latter years of a sentence not only delays personal development but also undermines motivation among those who are keen to use their time productively from the outset.

9. **Prison governors in prisons holding young adults serving long sentences should prioritise sustained and meaningful contact with loved ones.**

This should involve greater flexibility and recognition of the full range of supportive relationships, extending beyond the biological family to include partners, friends and other significant figures who provide emotional stability and continuity. Practical mechanisms to improve contact should include reducing the financial costs associated with maintaining relationships (for example, through expanded and affordable use of digital communication), as well as providing additional visits, family days and opportunities for extended, relational contact. Strengthening these connections is critical to young adults' wellbeing.

10. **HMPPS should provide structured opportunities for young adults serving long sentences to contribute to and lead consultations on how their lives in custody could be improved.**

These opportunities should be meaningful rather than symbolic, with clear feedback loops demonstrating how young adults' views have informed decision-making. Providing young adults with opportunities to shape policies and regimes that affect them can strengthen feelings of dignity and respect and improve relationships between prisoners and prison management and staff.

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Being Young Inside explores what it means to receive and serve a long prison sentence at the point of transition into adulthood. Drawing on in-person consultations with 41 young men serving sentences of 10 years or more across four prisons in England and Wales, alongside written contributions and existing evidence, this report examines how young adults experience the shock of sentencing, adapt to life in custody and attempt to build a future while growing up behind bars. It highlights the distinct developmental, social and emotional challenges faced by this group, many of whom entered prison with prior experiences of exclusion, care, trauma and institutional intervention, and considers how prison regimes can either entrench harm or support growth. At a time when sentence lengths for young adults are increasing, the report calls for a coherent and trauma-informed approach that recognises young adulthood as a critical stage of life. Without meaningful opportunities for progression, purposeful activity and supportive relationships, young people risk spending their formative years surviving custody rather than preparing for life beyond it.