

Young People's Experiences of the Scottish Prison Estate: An HMIPS Analytical Review

**HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland
2024**

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**"If I could go back to Polmont I'd go in a heartbeat."
- *A young person in the adult estate, 2023***

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Acknowledgments

This report was prepared by Dr Liz Ravalde, Senior Researcher, HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland, on behalf of the HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland, Wendy Sinclair-Gieben.

We would like to thank all those who assisted in various ways, including Calum McCarthy, Kerry Love, Graeme Neill, Stephen Sandham, Shea Murray, Vicky Dunlop, Dorothy Halliday, Ewan Mackenzie and Celia MacIntyre. Thank you also to the SPS staff who facilitated visits and focus groups and provided all the information we requested of them.

Above all, thanks to all those across the prison estate who took part in the HMIPS pre-inspection survey, and especially to those young people who gave their time to take part in focus groups for this review.

Foreword

Wendy Sinclair-Gieben

His Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland

Young adulthood is a pivotal period of emotional, cognitive, and physical development for all of us. Research suggests that young adults go through significant brain development and maturation until at least their mid-twenties, a process that can have negative implications for some young people's behaviour. Many young people in the Scottish prison system have also grown up with considerable disadvantage and trauma. Often, they bear the burden of multiple vulnerabilities such as childhood care experience, mental health problems, disability or chronic illness, brain injury and substance use.

For these young people, getting the right support and opportunities for rehabilitation at this crucial stage of maturation and development is critical.

As the Scottish Prison Service (SPS) acknowledges in its [Vision for Young People in Custody 2021](#), as well as being a means of punishment, imprisonment should offer an opportunity for young people to start afresh. To gain education qualifications, vocational skills, and work experience. To receive the rehabilitative support, they need to overcome difficulties with their mental health, substance use and offending behaviour. To maintain and develop positive ties with their families and friends outside of prison and to learn how to live respectfully, responsibly, and safely when they are released back into the community. This is important not only for them as individuals, but for ensuring a safe society for us all.

However, this review suggests that too often this is not an option for young people in custody in Scotland, even when they themselves express a desire to change their own lives for the better. The young people contributing to this review reported exasperation at a failing progression system which held them back from trying to prove that they were capable of change and rehabilitation. They reported frustration at a lack of opportunity for skills training in relevant occupations. They reported mental stress caused by the extensive periods they were forced to spend locked in their cells rather than engaging in productive and meaningful activity. They reported fear of returning to the community unprepared and ill-equipped for life outside prison. A substantial proportion of young adults did not feel they were getting the help they needed to manage their mental health or issues relating to drug and alcohol use. As a result of these apparent shortcomings, some reported becoming jaded, losing motivation and giving up on the idea of personal change.

There were some positive findings. For example, young people living in HMP & YOI Polmont tended to report relatively positive experiences, particularly with regard to their relationships with staff, family contact and access to healthcare. However, the experiences of young people living in the general adult population across the prison estate appeared to be markedly different. They reported more negative experiences across many aspects of prison life, from purposeful activity to relationships with staff, to health and wellbeing.

It is clear that more could and should be done to ensure that young adults in custody are given the support they need to move away from crime and return successfully back into society. Whenever a young person enters custody in Scotland, there should be the support available to ensure that this step is not a dead end or an escalation into more serious offending, but an opportunity to start that journey.

I would like to take this opportunity to say thank you to Dr Liz Ravalde and all the people including the SPS staff and prisoners who contributed to this report.

**Wendy Sinclair-Gieben,
HM Chief Inspector of Prisons for Scotland**

Executive Summary

Background

This is an HM Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland Analytical Review of Young People's Experiences of the Scottish prison estate, examining the experiences of those aged 25 and under in the Scottish prison system.

A growing body of evidence suggests that young people in prison often have multiple vulnerabilities, and that the brain remains in an active state of maturation up to at least the age of 25. Both are thought to have implications for the behaviour and support needs of young adults in prison, a group whose needs can easily be overlooked.

The aim of the review was to use data from the HMIPS pre-inspection prisoner survey, to compare the experiences of young people held in a Young Offenders Institution (YOI), young people held in an adult estate, and older adults (those aged 26 and over). This quantitative data analysis was complemented by focus groups with young people in three SPS establishments to understand in greater depth the challenges for, and needs of, young people in prison in Scotland. The review focuses on seven key aspects of prison life: relationships with staff; getting help; purposeful activity; family contact; health and wellbeing; safety; and transitions.

Summary of method

HMIPS pre-inspection survey data collected in 2022-23 from 1,046 prisoners in seven closed-conditions prisons in Scotland, was used to compare the experiences of young people held at HMP & YOI Polmont (aged 22 and under), young people held in the adult estate (aged 21-25), and older prisoners (aged over 25). Data was also requested from the SPS to show the age distribution of a number of measures such as segregation use, use of force (UoF) incidents and suicide-prevention interventions. This quantitative data was supplemented by focus groups and interviews undertaken with 39 young people in custody at HMP & YOI Polmont, HMP Barlinnie and HMP Edinburgh between June and November 2023.

Key findings

The evidence presented in this review suggests that young people held in HMP YOI Polmont, particularly those on convicted halls, generally felt relatively well supported. They reported relatively positive relationships with staff, good access to healthcare and good access to purposeful activity. There are caveats though, with the data indicating that young people were spending too little time out of their cells, and not always getting access to entitlements such as one hour a day of fresh air.

The experiences of young people living in the general adult population appeared notably less positive. They reported more negative experiences across many aspects of prison life. From purposeful activity, to relationships with staff, to health and wellbeing. While some young people taking part in focus groups in HMP & YOI Polmont spoke with enthusiasm about the education and qualifications they were gaining, and the opportunities they believed they would be given for rehabilitation,

those in the adult estate were generally much more negative and far less optimistic about their futures.

Given that the majority of people aged under 25 are held in the adult estate, this raises concerns about whether most young people receive the support they need, particularly given the evidence on the vulnerability and continuing emotional and cognitive development of young people. It also raises the question of whether any positive changes young people make to their lives while in the YOI setting and any benefits conferred by the relatively positive experiences they have there, may be lost after they move to the adult estate.

The key findings of this review are:

- Vulnerabilities in the young adult prison population:** Young people in prison self-reported high rates of vulnerability. For example, 69% reported having needed mental health support in prison; 60% reported having been in care; 38% reported having a disability or long-term health condition; 36% reported needing support for drug use; and 29% reported needing support for alcohol use.
- Drop-off in support for young people outside the YOI setting:** Across most measures analysed, young people held in the adult estate reported notably less positive experiences in prison than young people held in the YOI setting, particularly regarding relationships with staff, purposeful activity and health and wellbeing. Often their experience was also more negative than that of older adults. This raises concerns about whether most young people receive the support they need, particularly given the evidence on the vulnerability and continuing emotional and cognitive development of young prisoners.
- Variation in experiences across the prison estate:** In addition to the variation in experiences of young people held in the YOI setting compared to those in the adult estate, focus group participants described variation in quality of experience depending on differences in location. For example, in both settings the quality of experience was described as being more positive for those on convicted halls compared to remand halls, and young people in the adult estate described differences in their treatment and conditions depending on which adult prison they were held in, and whether they were protection or mainstream prisoners. Differences appeared to be particularly pronounced regarding relationships with staff and purposeful activity.
- Relationships with staff:** Young people held in the YOI setting were more positive about their relationships with staff than the young people held elsewhere in the prison estate. For example, 75% of young people in the YOI setting reported being treated with respect by staff all or most of the time, compared to 54% of young people in the adult estate, and 60% of those aged over 25.
- Getting help:** A recurrent theme in focus groups, particularly among young people on remand and those held in the adult estate, was a lack of trust in the people and systems in place to support them, such as prison staff and the complaints system. However, young people did not appear to be more negative about this than older adults. There were also examples of positive experiences,

such as the provision of youth work services and the training of peer mentors in HMP & YOI Polmont by the third-sector organisation Barnardo's Scotland.

- **Safety:** Young people in both settings generally appeared to feel more safe than older adults, with those in the YOI setting providing the most positive responses on most safety measures. For example, 77% of young people in the YOI setting reported feeling safe all or most of the time in prison, compared to 63% of young people in the adult estate and 54% of older adults.
- **Purposeful activity:** Overall, the evidence raised concerns about a lack of purposeful activity for young people across the Scottish prison estate, leading to boredom, frustration, and worsening mental health. Comparatively high proportions of young people in the YOI setting reported easy access to education and skills training, and regular access to the gym and/or sports. However, their relative lack of access to their legal daily entitlement of one hour a day of fresh air, and the long periods they were spending locked in their cells, was a concern. Equally, while young people in the adult estate generally were able to spend more time out of their cells than those in the YOI setting, they reported comparatively poor access to education, training, employment and the library.
- **Time out of cell:** A substantial percentage of young people reported not being able to spend more than two hours outside their cell each day, particularly in the YOI setting. For example, just over half (54%) of young people in the YOI setting reported having been able to spend more than two hours out of their cells on the previous weekday, rising to 62% for young people in the adult estate, and 71% for older adults.
- **Family contact:** Overall, young people in the YOI setting were more positive about their ability to stay in touch with their families than those in the adult estate. Those in the YOI were most likely to say they had an opportunity to access visits at least once a week, that their visitors were treated with respect and that they had access to a personal phone. However, despite the evidence on the importance of maintaining family contact to supporting young people through their time in prison and mitigating the risk of reoffending, over 40% of young people in the adult estate, and over 25% of those in the YOI setting reported not having the opportunity for an in-person visit at least once a week.
- **Health and wellbeing:** Overall, young people in the YOI setting were most positive about their healthcare and wellbeing, while young people in the adult estate were least positive. Their survey responses suggested particular difficulties in accessing key medical services in the adult estate. Particular concerns raised included shortcomings in mental health support in both settings, with some reporting that they did not feel their mental health was taken seriously, and feeling that residential staff could be punitive and unsupportive when dealing with young people with poor mental health. Support for substance use and access to medication were also highlighted as causes for concern. Young adults from both settings who took part in focus groups drew attention to the difficulties of ensuring good physical and mental health given the limited access they reported having to exercise, healthy food and mental stimulation.

- **Transitions, rehabilitation and progression:** Young people tended to speak more positively about transitions into the YOI setting than transitions into the adult estate.

Young prisoners in both settings raised concerns about a lack of opportunity for rehabilitation and progression at this crucial stage in their emotional and cognitive development. In particular, they expressed worry and frustration at parole applications being rejected because they had not been given timely opportunities to undertake their required programmes.

- **The importance of the little things:** Throughout the review, young people highlighted small changes that they felt could make a major difference to how they felt in prison, their mental health, and their motivation to better themselves. Examples included: being treated consistently by officers; being treated and spoken to with respect by officers; removing uncertainty by being given information on how long they needed to wait, and progress updates to access things like medical services, programmes and complaints procedures; being given more time for social interaction, activity and fresh air; and not having activities, exercise and visits cancelled or cut short.

Introduction

Background

A growing body of evidence suggests that young adults in prison in Scotland and the wider United Kingdom tend to live with multiple vulnerabilities, including experience of childhood trauma or bereavement, care experience, mental health issues, substance misuse, learning difficulties, and disabilities (Youth Justice Improvement Board 2017; Cesaroni et al. 2023; Harris 2015; Armstrong and McGhee 2019; Berelowitz and Hibbert 2011; British Psychological Society 2015). They are also more likely than the general population to have experienced “adverse childhood experiences” (ACEs) including witnessing or being a victim of abuse and violence (Prison Reform Trust 2019).

Added to this, there is a growing body of evidence to suggest that during young adulthood, possibly up to the age of 30, the brain remains in an active state of development (O'Rourke et al. 2020; Prior et al. 2011; Asato et al. 2010; Johnson et al. 2009). During this phase, it is argued that areas of the brain associated with cognitive and emotional function are still maturing, with implications for the behaviour of some young adults (Tanner and Arnett 2009; O'Rourke 2020). Some young people's actions and responses, particularly to negative stimuli, are thought to be different from those of older adults who have stabilised neurologically, because of this ongoing cognitive development (Price 2021). As O'Rourke et al. (2020) explain: “the brain's continued maturation during adolescence and into early adulthood limits the functional abilities of young people, impacting their capacity to control their behaviour”. As a result, some argue, like Saunders (2014), that the “pathway to physiological, emotional and psychosocial maturity depends on [the person's] individual rate of maturation” rather than on their chronological age.

Combined with the fact that many young adults in custody come from difficult backgrounds with a history of trauma, abuse, and physical or mental health issues, Hughes et al. (2016) argue that the challenges posed by their ongoing cognitive and emotional maturity are often more pronounced than they would be among less vulnerable young adults.

In the criminal justice context, therefore, some argue that there is a need for a distinct approach to managing young adults to acknowledge that different individuals mature at different rates, and that “many young adults in the criminal justice system exhibit [maturity] levels more characteristic of a far younger age group” (Criminal Justice Alliance, 2014). This has already been taken into consideration by the Scottish Sentencing Council, which introduced new guidelines for sentencing young people under the age of 25 in January 2022 (Scottish Sentencing Council, 2022). However, in many jurisdictions young prisoners arbitrarily lose many of the support services and safeguards available to children on reaching a specific birthday (Price 2021). In Scotland, there is a [Vision for Young People in Custody 2021](#) (SPS), for those aged 16-21, but no specific policy for the care of young people older than 21.

Aims

This analysis focuses on the experiences of young people – those aged 25 and under¹ – in the Scottish prison system. It uses data generated by the HMIPS pre-inspection survey during 2022-23, as well as qualitative evidence from young prisoners and data requested from the SPS to:

- Compare the experiences of prisoners aged 25 and under with the experiences of those aged over 25 to identify any areas where young prisoners appear to have particular challenges and needs.
- Compare the experiences of young prisoners held in the Young Offenders Institution (YOI) setting with those held in the adult estate.
- Understand the challenges for, and needs of, young prisoners in Scotland, from their perspective.

The analysis focuses on the following seven areas of prison life: relationships with staff; getting help; purposeful activity; family contact; health; safety; and transitions.

Method

The review took a mixed-methods approach, using HMIPS pre-inspection survey data, a brief literature review, focus groups and data requests from the SPS.

Literature review

A brief literature review was undertaken in May-June 2023. This focused on literature from Scotland and the rest of the UK over the last decade to identify areas where particular concerns have been noted in relation to young prisoners. The findings were used to inform the focus of the analysis and each chapter of the review findings.

HMIPS pre-inspection survey data

The analysis used HMIPS pre-inspection survey data which had been routinely collected at all prisons undergoing a full inspection since its initiation in March 2022. This survey collects anonymous data on prison experiences from a randomly selected sample of prisoners before every full HMIPS prison inspection.² All data collected during 2022 and 2023 in closed-conditions prisons was used in this analysis. The survey is conducted in-person by HMIPS staff over two consecutive days, and sample sizes are selected with the aim of achieving at minimum 95% confidence level with a 7% margin of error.

The original dataset included all 1,046 survey participants who disclosed their age in their survey responses in surveys conducted in 2022-23. The dataset includes the following seven establishments: HMP Shotts (2022), HMP Inverness (2022),

¹ This report uses the terms “young people” and “young adults” interchangeably to refer to those aged 25 and under.

² In establishments with a population smaller than around 300, all prisoners are asked to complete the survey.

HMP Addiewell (2022), HMP Greenock (2023), HMP Perth (2023), HMP & YOI Polmont (2023) and HMP Edinburgh (2023). This consisted of 212 participants aged 25 or under, and 834 participants over the age of 25. Of those under the age of 25, 150 were held at HMP & YOI Polmont and 62 were held in the adult estate.³ Those who did not disclose their age were excluded from the analysis, with the exception of males held at HMP & YOI Polmont.⁴

To address the variation in the number of prisoners across each establishment, the data was weighted to ensure a proportionate reflection of the entire population of the seven establishments included in the dataset. The weighted dataset, used for the analysis, included 70 young people held in HMP & YOI Polmont, 69 young people in the adult estate, and 908 people aged over 25.

The HMIPS pre-inspection survey includes 86 questions on a range of aspects of prison life, linked to the HMIPS Inspection Standards.⁵ A sub-set of questions relevant to each part of the present analysis was selected for comparative analysis in this review. The comparative analysis was conducted using chi square tests of independence, to test for significant differences between the reported experiences of the following three prisoner groups:

1. Young people held in Scotland's only YOI, HMP & YOI Polmont (aged up to 22).
2. Young people (aged 21-25 or under) held in the adult estate in Scotland.
3. Older adults (aged over 25) held in the adult estate.

This method enabled an understanding of whether any differences seen in the responses from each group were likely to represent meaningful differences between these three sub-sets of prisoners.

The HMIPS pre-inspection survey asks a series of closed multiple-choice questions. Most of these offer multiple possible answers, including options such as "don't know" and "don't remember". To conduct a comparative analysis, the responses to each question included in the analysis were recoded to create binary response categories, to allow for the use of a chi square test of independence. All non-responses, "don't know" and "don't remember" responses were excluded from the analysis. A chi square test of independence was then performed on each question. The results and accompanying analysis are reported in the findings section below.

Focus groups and interviews

To supplement and explore the quantitative findings gained from the survey analysis, 11 focus groups and interviews were conducted with young adults in

³ Although the majority of prisoners aged 25 and under are held in the adult estate, the dataset contains a larger number of those held in the YOI setting due to the fact that the whole population of HMP & YOI Polmont had been surveyed, whereas in many establishments (those with more than 300 prisoners) a random sample is selected; see Limitations section.

⁴ All males held in HMP & YOI Polmont at the time of data collection were known to be aged 22 or under.

⁵ [Inspecting and Monitoring Standards for Inspecting and Monitoring Prisons in Scotland: Introduction | HMIPS \(prisonsscotland.gov.uk\)](https://www.prisonsscotland.gov.uk/inspecting-and-monitoring-standards-for-inspecting-and-monitoring-prisons-in-scotland-introduction-hmips)

HMP & YOI Polmont (male and female), HMP Barlinnie (male) and HMP Edinburgh (male). Focus groups were conducted with both convicted and remand prisoners, and those on both mainstream and protection halls.

In total, 39 young adults took part in the focus groups and interviews, including 14 from HMP & YOI Polmont, 14 at HMP Barlinnie, and 11 from HMP Edinburgh. These ranged in size from interviews with one or two participants, to focus groups of up to eight participants, depending on the availability and numbers of young people who volunteered to take part.

These three establishments were chosen for focus groups as they were the three establishments holding the largest numbers of young adults. Between them they accounted for 53% of the population of prisoners aged 25 or under. HMP & YOI Polmont is the only male YOI establishment in Scotland, and holds around a quarter (16%) of the young adult prison population. The adult establishments, HMP Barlinnie and HMP Edinburgh held the next largest proportions of the young adult prisoner population (27% between them).

Each focus group lasted approximately one hour, led by two HMIPS facilitators. Where all participants agreed, focus groups were recorded to allow for transcription. Participation was voluntary and participants were made aware that they could ask for the recorder to be switched off at any time.

Qualitative analysis of open question in the pre-inspection survey

While the focus groups provided useful qualitative data to supplement and explain the findings of the pre-inspection survey, there was a risk that speaking in a group setting with their peers, young people may not feel able to speak openly about their experiences. Therefore, the qualitative analysis was supplemented by the responses to the open question at the end of the pre-inspection survey in the HMP & YOI Polmont survey, in which participants were invited to provide any comments they wished to HMIPS, confidentially and anonymously. In total, 57 young people provided comments. These were analysed thematically alongside the focus group responses to demonstrate the main concerns highlighted by young prisoners at HMP & YOI Polmont.

Limitations

There are a number of limitations to this study. As with all social research data, there are limitations to the quantitative and qualitative findings, including response and non-response bias, and memory and recall issues among participants.

Given that the vast majority of young people held in custody in Scotland are male, the overall findings are inevitably skewed towards the male perspective. However, young females were included in the overall comparative analysis and participated in a focus group at HMP & YOI Polmont. Moreover, as the dataset did not include responses from all adult establishments, the survey findings for adult establishments provides a representative view of prisoners' opinions in the six adult establishments included, and are therefore not generalisable to whole adult prison population.

One key limitation of this study is the under-representation of the population of young people held in the adult estate within the dataset. Within the six adult establishments included in the study, on 15 June 2023 there were 273 young people aged 25 or under. However, the weighted dataset used in this analysis included only 69. This discrepancy may reduce the representativeness of the findings for the young adult population, as the available sample may not fully capture the diversity of views within this group. This limitation arises from practical constraints: firstly, pre-inspection survey data is not yet available for all Scottish prisons, including some of those holding relatively large numbers of young men (for example, HMP Barlinnie, HMP Low Moss, and HMP & YOI Grampian). Secondly, while the survey was distributed to all prisoners in HMP & YOI Polmont due to its relatively small prisoner numbers (around 300 at the time of data collection), in larger establishments, it was distributed to a random sample of prisoners, rather than the whole population. As a result, fewer young people outside of HMP & YOI Polmont would have had the opportunity to complete the survey. This therefore limits the extent to which the overall survey findings for young people held in adult establishments can be generalised to the whole population of young adults within the six adult prisons included in the study. As such, the data for young people in the adult estate should be interpreted with particular caution.

When running multiple chi square tests on a single dataset, there is an increased risk of returning false positive results (where a significant difference is shown in the data that does not exist in real life). This is because, with a p-value of .05, there is a 5% chance of obtaining a false positive on each test. Meaning that when multiple measures are tested, the chance of obtaining at least one false positive result increases. While this risk was mitigated to a large extent by the analysis focusing on general trends within each area of interest, the possibility of false positives should nevertheless be borne in mind. The recoding of multiple response options into binary options for the chi square analysis also risks removing some of the nuance of the original survey answers.

Given that the qualitative aspect of the analysis relied primarily on focus groups, there is a risk that some issues faced by young people may not have been aired if the young people were reluctant to discuss certain aspects of prison life in front of their peers. For HMP & YOI Polmont, this risk was mitigated to a large extent by including the open-text responses in the pre-inspection survey in the qualitative analysis. However, it was more difficult to obtain qualitative information on some areas of prison life, such as feelings of safety, than others due to an apparent reticence to discuss certain topics in a group setting.

Due to a lack of resources, it was not possible to conduct focus groups across the whole range of adult establishments. Although several focus group participants in the adult estate had experience of multiple establishments, allowing for some level of anecdotal comparative insight.

Ethics and Data Protection

The analysis was conducted in line with HMIPS' and the Scottish Government Research Group's ethics principles. All data collected for this project was collected and stored in line with GDPR. Particular attention was paid to safeguarding given the

young age of potential research participants, following HMIPS' Child Safeguarding guidelines.

Young People in the Scottish Prison Estate

Number and location of young people in prison

Based on statistics provided by the SPS at the beginning of this review, there were 878 young people aged 25 or under held in the Scottish Prison estate on Thursday 15 June 2023. With an overall prison population of 7,751 on that day, young people accounted for 11.3% of the total prison population.⁶

All males aged under 21 are held at HMP & YOI Polmont, and most are moved to the adult estate at the age of 21. However, those turning 21 who are coming towards the end of their sentences and who will not turn 23 before the end of their sentence, are generally able to stay at HMP & YOI Polmont until their release, rather than moving to the adult estate. The small number of males aged under 18 held in HMP & YOI Polmont are held separately from those aged 18 and over. Outside of HMP & YOI Polmont, young men (aged 21-25) are held in the general adult male population, across all male establishments.

During the time of data collection for this review, most young women (aged 25 or under) were held at HMP & YOI Polmont. However, this changed in late 2023 when the women held at HMP & YOI Polmont were relocated to the new HMP & YOI Stirling. Young women aged 21 and over at HMP & YOI Polmont were held within the general adult female population, while those aged 18-20 and 16-17 were held separately with some mixing between the different age groups where it was deemed safe and appropriate.

Table 1: Number of prisoners aged 25 or under on 15 June 2023

| Establishment | Female estate | | | Male estate | | | Overall | |
|---------------|---------------|-----------|-----------|-------------|------------|------------|------------|-------------|
| | Convicted | Untried | Total | Convicted | Untried | Total | Total | Percent |
| Polmont | 6 | 9 | 15 | 100 | 110 | 210 | 225 | 26% |
| Barlinnie | 0 | 0 | 0 | 85 | 56 | 141 | 141 | 16% |
| Edinburgh | 4 | 4 | 8 | 50 | 35 | 85 | 93 | 11% |
| Low Moss | 0 | 0 | 0 | 47 | 40 | 87 | 87 | 10% |
| Addiewell | 0 | 0 | 0 | 31 | 30 | 61 | 61 | 7% |
| Grampian | 2 | 3 | 5 | 26 | 25 | 51 | 56 | 6% |
| Perth | 0 | 0 | 0 | 27 | 20 | 47 | 47 | 5% |
| Glenochil | 0 | 0 | 0 | 44 | 0 | 44 | 44 | 5% |
| Kilmarnock | 0 | 0 | 0 | 18 | 13 | 31 | 31 | 4% |
| Shotts | 0 | 0 | 0 | 31 | 0 | 31 | 31 | 4% |
| Inverness | 0 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 12 | 22 | 22 | 3% |
| Greenock | 1 | 2 | 3 | 10 | 6 | 16 | 19 | 2% |
| Dumfries | 0 | 0 | 0 | 13 | 3 | 16 | 16 | 2% |
| Castle Huntly | 0 | 0 | 0 | 4 | 0 | 4 | 4 | <1% |
| Bella | 1 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | <1% |
| Lilias | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0% |
| Total | 14 | 18 | 32 | 496 | 350 | 846 | 878 | 100% |

⁶ Data provided to HMIPS by SPS.

Who are the young people in the Scottish prison estate?

As shown in the table above, in June 2023 the largest percentage of young people (26%) were held in HMP & YOI Polmont, with notable percentages also held in HMP Barlinnie (16%), HMP Edinburgh (11%), HMP Low Moss (10%) and HMP Addiewell (7%). The majority of young female prisoners were held at HMP & YOI Polmont and HMP Edinburgh.⁷

The vast majority of young prisoners were male (96%). Of these young males, 59% were convicted and 41% were untried. There were 32 young women in custody, the majority of whom (56%) were untried, while 44% were convicted.

Similar to the overall Scottish prison population, the majority of young people in the pre-inspection survey self-reported as being white (92%), male (97%), and holding UK citizenship (95%).

Complexity and vulnerabilities

The SPS has noted that the challenges of managing young people have changed considerably in recent years. Referring specifically to 16-21 year olds, they have noted that while there has been a decrease in the number of this age group in custody, there has been an increase in the “complexity and severity of young people’s risks and needs, including their need for additional support for their learning”. They also highlight the increase in the number of young people held on remand (Scottish Prison Service 2021). The increasing complexity and vulnerability of the young prison population was outlined in detail by a report by the Youth Justice Improvement Board (YJIB) in 2017 which indicated high levels of care experience, involvement with the Children’s Hearings System, bereavement, exposure to trauma and head injury among young people held at HMP & YOI Polmont (YJIB 2017).

Data collected from the HMIPS pre-inspection survey supports the view, as demonstrated in the literature from elsewhere in Scotland and the wider UK (for example, Cesaroni et al. 2023; British Psychological Society 2015; Dyer and Nolan 2016), that young people in custody in Scotland tend to exhibit high levels of vulnerability. For example, the HMIPS survey data showed that:

- **Three in five** (60%) of the young people reported having been in care when they were under the age of 18.
- Almost **two in five** (38%) young people reported having a disability or long-term health condition
- Almost **seven in ten** (69%) young people reported needing support for their mental health while in their current prison.
- More than **one in three** (36%) young people reported needing support for drug use while in their current prison.

⁷ This data was received after the closure of HMP YOI Cornton Vale, but before female prisoners had begun moving to the new women’s facility at HMP & YOI Stirling. By the time focus groups took place in HMP Edinburgh in October 2023, all women previously held in HMP Edinburgh had moved to HMP & YOI Stirling.

- Almost **one in three** (29%) young people reported needing support for alcohol use while in their current prison.

Moreover, a one-week snapshot of data provided to HMIPS by the SPS showed that young people were over-represented in both Separation and Reintegration Unit (SRU) occupancy and involvement in UoF incidents across the prison estate. In total, 16% (24) of those held in SRUs and 31% (19) of those subject to UoF procedures that week were aged 25 or under, despite young people making up around 11% of the total prison population.

SPS policy on young people

The SPS introduced a Vision for Young People in Custody in 2014, which was updated in 2021 (Scottish Prison Service, 2021). This document outlines its long-term plan for those aged 16-21. While the vision acknowledges the growing literature on the continuation of brain development and the implications of this up to the age of 25, it defines young people as aged 16-21, and there is no specific policy regarding young people over the age of 21.

Its primary aim is “to use the time a young person spends in custody to enable them to prepare for a positive future.” In order to do this, the vision seeks to provide “in a safe and secure environment, care and experiences which will support the young person’s mental, physical and emotional wellbeing, build their knowledge, skills, employability and promote their successful reintegration into their communities”. Within this, the vision outlines three key steps. First to provide individual planning with each young person for their time in custody and their reintegration. Second, to provide experiences, based on this plan, that will enable them to achieve their outcomes. And third, to establish the conditions that will maximise the likelihood of positive change while minimising the damaging effects of exclusion.

Relationships with staff

Background

The ability to develop positive relationships with prison staff has been highlighted by numerous studies and organisations as an important factor in maintaining the wellbeing of young prisoners. These relationships are argued to be key to ensuring early intervention when young prisoners are struggling, and to negating feelings of isolation and hopelessness that are reportedly common among young people in custody. It has been argued that good relationships with officers can make the difference between increasing or decreasing the stress felt by young people in custody (Armstrong and McGhee 2019; Harris 2015; Ludlow et al. 2015; Slade and Forester 2015; Wright et al. 2014). As research from the Scottish context states: “Where officers have built high quality relationships with those in their care, they can identify when a person is having issues with common problems such as maintaining family contact, accessing work and/or education or accessing healthcare needs. Developing relationships that the person in their care values will also see them more likely to approach them for help or advice” (Armstrong and McGhee 2019).

However, in the available literature on young people in prison in Scotland and the UK more widely, the general perception is that younger prisoners tend to have poorer relationships with staff than their older counterparts (Armstrong and McGhee 2019; Harris 2015; HMIP 2021). In Scotland, it has been reported that young prisoners often “describe a culture of mistrust” regarding their relationships with prison officers (Armstrong and McGhee 2019).

Overview of findings

The findings of this review present a nuanced picture regarding young prisoners' relationships with staff. On most measures of staff relationships in the survey, young people held in the YOI setting were more positive responses than those held in the adult estate. Meanwhile, young people in the adult estate tended to be more negative than both older adults and young people in YOI settings. Qualitative evidence suggested that there were differences in experiences of staff depending on where in the YOI setting the young people were held.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|---|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| They are treated with respect by staff all/most of the time | 75% | 54% | 60% | Yes |
| They have a personal officer | 74% | 52% | 55% | Yes |
| Their personal officer is helpful | 78% | 69% | 59% | Yes |
| They would/probably would report abuse, etc, by staff | 40% | 22% | 38% | Yes |
| They would/probably would report abuse, etc, by other prisoners | 23% | 13% | 23% | No |

Respect

Of the three groups, young people held in the YOI setting were the most likely to report that they were treated with respect by staff all or most of the time, with 75% reporting this. In contrast, 60% of the over 25 population and 54% of the young population held in the adult estate reported being treated with respect all or most of the time by staff. These differences were significant ($X^2=7.82$, $df=2$, $p=.020$).

These findings were broadly reflected by the comments of those who took part in the focus groups. Those held in HMP & YOI Polmont were generally more positive about their interactions with staff, tending to report that staff treated them well, and that some would go out of their way to support them. Some who provided comments on the HMIPS pre-inspection survey also highlighted positive interactions with staff. For example, one young person commented that:

“The staff are fantastic! Always friendly and smiling, some going out of their way to help you, always respectful and somewhat different than I’ve experienced in other prisons”.

Another reported that:

“The staff are very nice and respect you the same way as if you were outside the prison... [although] I think some staff do need to treat prisoners with more respect, sometimes the staff are quite cheeky and look for a reaction”.

Among mainstream convicted males in HMP & YOI Polmont, there was a general consensus that the staff were respectful and treated prisoners well. Although this was not so common among young males on protection halls, remand, or young females in HMP & YOI Polmont. As one young man on a protection hall in HMP & YOI Polmont commented:

“Since being in here I have heard members of SPS that work in my hall calling people beasts and freaks and more, and have been called this [myself]”.

This kind of name-calling and labelling runs well-documented risks of stigmatisation, negative self-identity, social exclusion and an increased likelihood of poor future behaviour (Bidwell and Polley 2023).

Focus group participants who had experienced both HMP & YOI Polmont and the adult estate reported staff having more time for prisoners in HMP & YOI Polmont, being more respectful and having better relationships with them. One young man in an adult establishment explained that:

“In Polmont the staff used to play pool with us, but in here, no chance that would happen”.

Another commented that:

“[In the adult estate] the only time a staff member will ever speak to you is if they are wanting you to do something, but there is no real relationship there;

we're just numbers to them. We are treated by our number, our last name, that is it ... that's a big difference to Polmont, in Polmont I was spoke to like I was a person, using first names. Here its only your last name, after years of that it belittles you."

Overall, focus group participants in the adult estate were not positive about their relationships with staff, with, as the comment above exemplifies, a lack of respect for young prisoners being one of the key themes of the discussions. While some young people in the adult estate did report having good relationships with staff, and feeling respected, the overall sense was prisoners felt that a minority of staff would go out of their way to help them, and a minority were actively disrespectful. The majority were seen as "alright"; as one young man summed up the general mood:

"If you're alright with them, they'll be alright with you, but some of the time you get ones that are just attitude all the time, with everyone".

Another echoed this, saying that:

"Some staff are alright, it's not like you feel you are getting respected, but they are civilised with you".

A few gave examples of particular officers on their halls who would go out of their way to support them. One young man, for example, said that:

"There's one staff member on our flat, you ask her to do something and she will go away and try to do it for you, she'll go out of her way to help you".

However, many felt that it was common for officers in the adult estate to be disrespectful towards prisoners, particularly those who were more difficult to manage or who had mental health problems. Several reported staff trying to provoke them into acting out or trying to start fights between prisoners, rather than working with them to help them cope in prison. As one young man in the adult estate reported:

"I've always had mental health issues, right, and I get angry... like, I will go mental, and see some of the screws in here, I'm like the skin of my teeth away from just losing it with them, like the cheek they've got. They've got a better attitude for some prisoners than they do for others, and I've seen it, some of them are brand new with me but they're arseholes to other people... I can understand why people hit the drugs in here because naebody's going to want to speak to a screw that's an arsehole to them."

Another common theme raised in focus groups in the adult estate was inconsistency and unpredictability in their interactions with staff. Most participants agreed that different individual staff members, and groups of staff, treated them differently, with most noting that there were "some good, [and] some bad" staff members. Exemplifying this point, one young person commented that:

"You wake up in this morning, you see who's working, and you go 'oh this is going to be a shite day' or 'this is gonna be decent'".

Another noted that:

“If they say good morning and good night, that is how you can tell that the staff are nice, but the majority just slam the door”.

Participants reported very different relationships with staff across different halls and across different adult prisons. They reported, for example, some halls having much more respectful and helpful staff than others, and staff having different attitudes in different prisons. As one young man explained, in one adult prison he had been in, “the screws were firm but fair”, whereas where he was now, he felt that officers could “just walk in and hit you at any time”. Some also commented that they found it difficult to deal with individual officers who behaved inconsistently. As one young man explained:

“Some [staff] just change their mood. They can come in in a good mood, and then they next day they're pure growling at you”.

Trust

Focus group participants also shared mixed views on whether there were staff members they trusted. In HMP & YOI Polmont, for example, those on male convicted halls tended to report being able to speak in confidence with officers, and feel that they could trust them. However, this was less commonly the case for remand and female young people in HMP & YOI Polmont. As one young man on a convicted hall summarised:

“Definitely in this hall [there are officers I can trust], but on the remand hall, there wasnae many screws that I trusted, this hall is different man – you can sit down and talk to them”.

Some females and remand males felt less trusting of staff, and some reported feeling judged and disrespected by staff. As one young female recounted:

“It's quite uncomfortable going to staff for certain things, because some of them are just looking down at you... I would never go to them for anything, to be honest. The older officers, to a certain extent you feel you can speak to them [though] ...”

In the adult estate, however, there was a stronger, although not complete, consensus among the young focus group participants that they would not feel comfortable discussing personal issues with staff, because they did not feel that they trusted them. As one young man explained:

“Maybe some of the staff are nice and that, but there is not one of them I would open up to, not at all”.

To a large extent, this appeared to stem from the general sense among young people in the adult estate that most staff did not try, or did not have time, to build good relationships with them or treat them with respect. Moreover, some spoke about being put off confiding in staff about mental health issues for fear of being

“punished” (See Health and Wellbeing section), while others felt that there was no point asking for support as “they always say ‘I’ll do it’ and then they don’t”.

Willingness to report abuse to prison staff

Prisoners’ self-reported willingness to report abusive behaviour by staff to other staff members, offers a further indication of the level of trust between prisoners and staff in the different settings. Survey participants were asked if they would report it to staff if they were abused, threatened, bullied or assaulted by an officer or another prisoner. In total, 40% of young people in the YOI said that they would report such behaviour by staff, compared to 22% of young people held elsewhere and 38% of the adult population. The differences between these groups were significant ($X^2=6.44$, $df=2$, $p=.040$), and are indicative of a greater mistrust of staff among young people held in the adult estate compared to those in the YOI setting, reflecting the more general view of staff relationships discussed above.

A similar pattern was evident regarding reporting of abuse by fellow prisoners. Fewer than a quarter of young people in YOIs said they would report abusive behaviour by other prisoners (23%), while 13% of young people elsewhere in the estate and 23% of adults said they would do so. However, the differences between the three groups were not significant ($X^2=4.05$, $df=2$, $p=.132$).

Personal Officers

Of the three groups, young people held in the YOI were more likely to report that they had a personal officer (74%) than the other two groups, despite this group having the largest proportion of young people on remand.⁸ Young people held in the adult estate were least likely to say they had a personal officer (52%, compared to 55% of older adults). The differences between the three groups were significant ($X^2=9.72$, $df=2$, $p=.008$).

Young people held in the YOI were also the most likely group to report that their personal officer was helpful.⁹ 78% of those held in the YOI said that their personal officer was helpful, compared to 63% of young people held elsewhere in the estate, and 59% of those aged over 25. These differences were significant ($X^2=7.365$, $df=2$, $p=.025$).

Those held in the adult estate who participated in focus groups were asked about their personal officers. While those on remand tended to report not having a personal officer, convicted participants tended to report that they had a personal officer. However, many noted that they rarely or never got a chance to speak to them and did not get the monthly meeting with their personal officer that should be expected. As one convicted young male reported, despite attempting to, he had never had a meeting with his personal officer:

“I’ve tried to get [my personal officer] to sit down with me to go over stuff, but she’s not got the time for me... I’ve not seen her at all.”

⁸ This is notable as while according to SPS policy all convicted prisoners should have a personal officer, this is not required for those on remand.

⁹ Only those who said they had a PO were asked this question.

Summary

Overall, this analysis indicates that better quality relationships between young prisoners and staff exist in the YOI setting compared to the adult estate. Those in the YOI setting were more likely to report positive engagement with personal officers and being treated with respect by staff, and appeared more likely to feel comfortable reporting poor staff behaviour to another member of staff. Findings from the focus groups, however, suggest that prisoner-staff relationships varied between different halls and prisoner groups even in the YOI setting.

Young people held in the adult estate tended to report more negative experiences regarding their relationships with staff than both the over-25 adult population, and young people in the YOI. This raises the question of whether there is a drop off in support from, and positive relationships with, staff when young people move from the YOI setting to the adult estate, and the effects this may have on these young people.

Given the extensive literature on the key role that positive relationships with staff can play in supporting young prisoners and mitigating their vulnerabilities, these findings raise questions about whether young people in the adult estate receive the practical and emotional support from staff that they need to cope while in prison and when preparing for release.

Getting Help

Background

One important aspect of staff developing good relationships with young prisoners is that this can facilitate better support for any issues they face, for example regarding access to visits, healthcare and jobs or education (Armstrong and McGhee 2019). More widely, HMIPS recognises the importance of support services within the prison system including complaints systems, social work support, third-sector interventions, Independent Prison Monitors (IPM), and a variety of healthcare services.

Some literature also highlights the important positive role that peer support schemes, such as trained listeners or peer mentors, can play in the lives of young prisoners, for example to alleviate feelings of isolation, stress and helplessness. Research suggests that well-implemented peer support schemes are valuable due to the peer supporters' unique ability to understand young people's situations and challenges (Armstrong and McGhee 2019; Harris Review 2015; Barker et al. 2014).

Overview of findings

To give an indication of young people's experiences of getting help and support in custody, the answers to three questions from the HMIPS pre-inspection survey were analysed, covering complaints and knowledge of how to access HMIPS's Independent Prison Monitors (IPMs) and healthcare. Focus group participants were also asked about who they would turn to for support, what support systems they had access to, and their experiences of these. The survey results showed a mixed picture, with young people in the YOI setting more positive about the complaints system and knowledge of how to access healthcare than the other two groups, but least likely to know how to contact an IPM. Qualitative data from focus groups suggested that generally most young people preferred to seek help and advice from other prisoners or family, rather than turning to prison staff or prison support systems.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| The complaints system works well | 43% | 21% | 19% | Yes |
| They know how to contact an IPM | 17% | 22% | 41% | Yes |
| They know how to access healthcare | 97% | 83% | 92% | Yes |

Knowledge of how to access support

Young people's knowledge of how to access healthcare and HMIPS IPMs were used as proxies for understanding their knowledge of access to support services. Almost all young people in the YOI setting (97%) reported knowing how to access healthcare services, compared to 83% of young people (and 92% of older adults) in the adult estate. The differences between these groups were significant ($X^2= 6.57$, $df= 2$, $p= .037$), and suggest a notable difference between the experiences of those

in the YOI setting compared to the adult estate, where almost one in five young people said they did not know how to access healthcare services.

Young people in the YOI setting were the least likely of the three groups to report knowing how to contact an IPM: 17% of young people in the YOI setting said they knew how to contact an IPM, compared with 22% of young people in the adult estate, and 41% of older adults. The differences between groups were significant ($X^2= 24.45$, $df= 2$, $p= <.001$). While it is unclear why this was the case, one possible explanation is that given that young people in HMP & YOI Polmont tended to report more positive experiences than young people in the adult estate, fewer of them had actively sought information about how to access an IPM.

Complaints

Prison complaints systems exist as the main way for prisoners to raise and address issues regarding their treatment in instances where they believe they have been treated unfairly or not in accordance with the prison rules. In theory, complaints systems should act as a safety net to deal with problems arising from apparently unfair or unlawful treatment. However, most young people did not feel that the complaints system worked well, with 43% of young people in the YOI setting and 21% of young people in the adult estate reporting that the complaints system in their establishment worked well. Although less than half of young people in the YOI setting responded positively to this question, they were more positive than young people or older adults in the adult estate, and the differences between the three groups were significant ($X^2= 12.33$, $df= 2$, $p= .002$). These results suggest a widespread scepticism of the ability of prisons to address concerns among both young prisoners and their older counterparts. This was raised by some participants in the adult estate, with focus group participants expressing a lack of faith in staff willingness to act on complaints. Some respondents expressed reluctance to make complaints for fear of being treated worse to punish them for putting in a complaint.

Support from peers and staff

Young people from male convicted halls who took part in the focus groups in HMP & YOI Polmont generally reported good access to other forms of support not included in the pre-inspection questionnaire, and felt that they knew where to turn for support. For example, several reported positive experiences of using the peer mentor scheme. Through this scheme, young people could ask to speak to a fellow prisoner who had been trained as a peer mentor to offer support and guidance. As noted in the previous section, others reported feeling comfortable speaking to an officer if they were struggling or needed help.

However, the female focus group participants and male remands in the YOI setting were less positive, highlighting problems such as not being aware of the peer-mentor scheme, finding it unhelpful, or not trusting the peer mentors. Some reported not trusting prison staff and feeling that there was nowhere to seek help other than conversations with fellow prisoners and/or family members.

Among young people in the adult estate, there was a sense that support both from peer mentor/listener schemes and prison staff was sporadic. Some respondents

reported knowing about peer mentor and/or listener schemes, whereas others had never heard of them, or had heard of them but did not know what they were. Some participants noted that staff did not actively promote such schemes even if they were available, and that they discouraged from asking for information by the attitudes of staff. As one young man in the adult estate explained:

“A lot of the staff, they don't have a welcoming attitude about them, you wouldn't want to ask them about anything because a lot of the times I have asked an officer a question, it is often like 'oh, why are you asking?'”

Similarly, many focus group participants in the adult estate reported negative experiences of seeking help from staff. The general consensus was that their best chance of getting help or information was to speak to other prisoners, as staff were not generally forthcoming in providing help, information or advice. Some reported their buzzers going ignored or being switched off when they were seeking support while locked in their cells. Others reported that although there were some staff members they could trust to speak to if they needed help, often they felt they needed to “kick off” in order to get help. A few highlighted, for example, that they had to threaten or commit an act of violence or disruption in order to get what they wanted, as asking politely often did not work. As one young man summarised:

“If you speak up for yourself, they treat you differently to those who just take all the shite. If you stand up for yourself and show that you aren't going to let them [staff] walk all over you, that's when you'll get what you want. You'll get nothing at all if you stay quiet.”

Some reported that whether you could get help from staff depended on the staff member in question, with some saying that there were specific staff members on their hall that they felt would go out of their way to help them, whereas others would not. As one young person put it:

“There's no [staff] I can say I actually trust; there are ones that I know will relay my information to the right source, and then there's other ones that will just [do nothing]. For example [X staff member], I tell him something and he fucks off, but [Y staff member], she's brand new, you tell her something and she makes sure she goes and gets it done for you”.

Summary

The survey and focus group data suggest that, on the whole, young prisoners tended to seek support first and foremost from peers and family, rather than wanting to speak to prison staff or use prison support systems. A recurrent theme was a lack of trust in the systems in place to support them, whether residential staff, peer mentors, or the complaints system. A second recurrent theme was the view that support from staff was dependent on which staff were available, with young prisoners repeatedly highlighting that there was generally a small minority of staff they felt comfortable asking for support from.

Particularly notable is the difference in responses between young prisoners in the YOI setting compared to the adult estate, with an apparent drop off in trust in the

complaints system and knowledge of how to access healthcare for young people in the adult estate.

Safety

Background

There is relatively little research on young people's feelings of personal safety in prison and YOI settings in Scotland. There is evidence to suggest that there are particular risk factors associated with self-harm and suicide among young people in custody, including being in the early days or weeks of being in prison or transferring to a different prison, being on remand (Armstrong and McGhee 2019), and having been bullied by a staff member or another prisoner (Harris 2015). However, there is little information on safety from bullying, threats, abuse and violence perpetrated by officers or other prisoners in Scotland. In England and Wales, the evidence suggests a mixed picture, with young prisoners tending to report similar levels of feelings of safety to their older counterparts, while also being over-represented as both perpetrators and victims of violence within prisons (HMIP 2021).

Overview of findings

Four questions from the HMIPS pre-inspection survey were analysed to examine feelings of safety. As in England and Wales, these comparisons presented a mixed picture. Young people in the YOI setting were more likely than the other groups to report feeling safe at least most of the time, and least likely to report experience of negative behaviour by staff. However, they were the most likely group to report having been the victim of abuse, threats, bullying or assault by other prisoners.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|---|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| They feel safe all/most of the time | 77% | 63% | 54% | Yes |
| They have witnessed staff abusing, threatening, bullying or assaulting another prisoner | 31% | 57% | 57% | Yes |
| They have been abused, threatened, bullied or assaulted by a staff member | 24% | 39% | 37% | No |
| They have been abused, threatened, bullied or assaulted by another prisoner | 48% | 23% | 40% | Yes |

Feelings of safety

Young people were more likely to report feeling safe all or most of the time than their older counterparts, with those in the YOI setting most likely to report feeling safe. Over three-quarters (77%) of young people held in the YOI setting reported feeling safe all or most of the time, compared to 63% of young people held elsewhere in the prison estate, and 54% of older adults. These differences were significant ($X^2=12.78$, $df=2$, $p<.001$).

Experiences of abuse, threats, bullying, or assault

Young people held in the YOI setting were less likely to report both witnessing and experiencing abuse, threats, bullying or assault by a staff member than young

people elsewhere in the estate, and the general adult population. The differences noted in the former were significant ($X^2=16.25$, $df=2$, $p<.001$), although those noted in the latter were not ($X^2=4.08$, $df=2$, $p=.130$). These differences reflect the findings earlier in this report that young people in the YOI setting tended to report better relationships with staff. They were also reflected by some young focus group participants in the adult estate who reported that they had felt safer in HMP & YOI Polmont than in their current location, and others who reported incidents of staff violence and heavy-handedness towards prisoners in the adult estate.

The one area regarding safety where young people in the YOI setting were more likely to report negative experiences than young people in the adult estate was regarding experience of abuse, threats, bullying or assault by other prisoners. Less than a quarter of young people in the adult estate reported such experiences (23%), compared to almost half of those held in the YOI (48%). The differences between the three groups were significant ($X^2=8.96$, $df=2$, $p<.011$). Focus group participants reflected these findings, with some of those who had experience of both settings noting that there was more aggression between prisoners in the YOI setting than in the adult estate. As one young man in the adult estate summarised:

“[In the adult prison] there aren't as many fights for no reason and stuff like that, and if you don't get involved in anything, nothing will happen to you. But in Polmont, someone can come up to you and get in a fight with you for no reason, but here [in the adult establishment], no way”

Some of those in Polmont suggested that this was at least in part due to prisoners spending very long periods locked in their cells, causing frustration which led to aggression when they were out. As one young person writing in the pre-inspection survey summarised:

“We are only out of our cells for one and a half hours a day – 45 minutes for rec and 45 mins for exercise... [we are] locked up all day and forgot about. When we are let out tensions run high because we are locked up all day every day”.

Young people's feelings of safety from violence by other prisoners in the adult estate appeared to depend on both their connections within the establishment, and where in the establishment they were held. As one young man put it: “I know that I am safe because of who I know”, but noted that others would not be safe from violence by other prisoners. Remands in the adult estate particularly felt that violence could be a problem with one noting that sometimes his hall is “quiet and safe... but other times violence comes out of nowhere and everything becomes tense”. It was common for all categories of focus group participants to note that they do, or would, feel safer on a long-term convicted hall than anywhere else.

Summary

This analysis indicates that there is a relationship between age, location and feelings of safety in the prison estate, although it is a mixed picture. Those in the YOI setting tended to report feeling safer generally, and in relation to prison staff, but were more likely to say they had experienced violent or abusive behaviour by other prisoners.

Meanwhile young people in the adult estate generally reported feeling less safe and reported higher levels of abuse by staff, but reported lower levels of violence and abuse from other prisoners.

Health and wellbeing

Background

Research suggests that young people in prison have higher levels of physical and mental health needs than young people in the general population (SCJRR 2019; Harris 2015; Lennox 2014). Regarding mental health, it is reported that young prisoners are more likely than older prisoners to externalise symptoms of poor mental health through challenging behaviour (Price 2021). However, particularly once in the adult estate, some researchers have found a tendency in UK prisons for this to be viewed in terms of “security concerns rather than expression of emotional distress”, meaning that restraint and punishment is a common response, rather than attempts to understand and treat the underlying mental health issues (Price 2021).

Some researchers have argued that there is an opportunity to provide vital support while prisoners are still young to “prevent decline into problem drug use, depression, reoffending, re-imprisonment, and social disconnection” (Plant and Taylor 2012). However, despite this potential opportunity, considerable concern remains that young peoples’ physical and mental health needs often go unmet while in prison (Harris 2015, Lennox 2014).

Overview of findings

The findings of this review suggest that, of the three groups, young people in the YOI setting had the most positive experiences regarding health and healthcare, although there did appear to be shortcomings in the healthcare for this group, particularly regarding mental health and substance use. Meanwhile, young people held in the adult estate tended to report the least positive experiences, generally reporting poor access to services and ineffective support. Some young people in the focus groups also highlighted feeling that they were stuck with a lifestyle unconducive to positive physical or mental health due to the poor diet, lack of exercise, and lack of physical or mental stimulation available in prison, and expressed concern about the effect of this on their overall health.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|---|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| It is easy to access a doctor | 73% | 21% | 26% | Yes |
| It is easy to access a nurse | 80% | 29% | 48% | Yes |
| It is easy to access a dentist | 64% | 16% | 23% | Yes |
| They have received support for their mental health and it has been helpful* | 59% | 21% | 29% | Yes |
| They have received support for alcohol use and it has been helpful* | 44% | 19% | 33% | No |
| They have received support for drug use and it has been helpful* | 44% | 31% | 51% | No |

*Responses only from those who reported having needed this support while in their current prison/YOI.

Access to medical services

There were significant differences in how the three groups reported their experiences of access to medical services. Young people in the YOI setting were consistently more likely to report that it was easy to access to doctors, nurses and dental services than the over-25 adult population, while young people held in the adult estate were less likely than the older adult population to report easy access. The differences reported were statistically significant in all three cases.¹⁰ For example, 73% of young people in the YOI setting said it was easy to access a doctor, compared to 21% of young people in the adult estate and 26% of older adults. And 80% of young people in the YOI setting said it was easy to access a nurse or nurse practitioner, compared to 29% of young adults in adult establishments, and 48% of older adults.

Although young people in HMP & YOI Polmont were most likely to report easy access to medical services, in focus groups some nevertheless noted that it could take weeks to be seen by a doctor or dentist and that prisoners did not receive updates on their appointment requests. Some reported feeling anxious as a result of not being told when they would be seen, how long they would have to wait, or where they were in the queue. Some reported having had to put in a complaint form in order to speed up the process of getting an appointment.

Those in the adult estate were also critical of access to medical services, with reports of long waits for non-emergency appointments (sometimes several months), rushed appointments, and medical staff not following up appropriately on long-term medical issues. Reflecting the quantitative findings, young people taking part in focus groups in the adult estate variously described the experience of attempting to access medical staff as “brutal”, “terrible” and “horrendous”.

Medication

Medication was a particular problem highlighted by young people in focus groups in both the YOI and adult settings, particularly regarding timely access to medication for both physical and mental health conditions. Some young people in the adult estate reported being unable to access necessary medications such as asthma inhalers, and others reported problems arising from having their medication removed or changed on arrival at a new establishment. Timely administration of repeat prescriptions was cited as a problem by several focus group participants, with one young man, for example, reporting that:

“Sometimes your medication is there, then the next week it willnae be there, and then you have to put another form in but you don’t have your medication for that week.”

Others said that they did not always receive their prescription medications at the right time of day, leading to doses being taken too soon or too late and feeling unwell as a result of this inconsistency.

¹⁰ Ease of access to doctor ($X^2=63.03$, $df=2$, $p<.001$); ease of access to a nurse ($X^2=33.35$, $df=2$, $p<.001$); ease of access to dental services ($X^2=52.67$, $df=2$, $p<.001$).

Mental Health

In the pre-inspection survey, almost seven in 10 (69%) young people reported needing support for their mental health while in custody, suggesting that this is an area of substantial concern for young prisoners. The SPS reported to HMIPS that 147 individuals were on the SPS Prevention of Suicide in Prison Strategy, Talk to Me (TTM), in the five days between Monday 23rd and Friday 27th October 2023. Of these, 25% (37) were aged 25 or under, despite young people making up only around 11% of the total prison population. Although only a week-long snapshot, this suggests particularly challenging issues regarding mental health among the younger prisoner population.

Of those who reported needing or having needed support for their mental health, 59% of young people in the YOI setting reported that they had received support that had been helpful. In contrast, 21% of young people in the adult estate, and 29% of older adults, reported having received helpful support for their mental health. These differences were significant ($X^2=19.44$, $df=2$, $p<.001$).

While the survey data suggests that young people in HMP & YOI Polmont have better experiences of mental healthcare than young people elsewhere in the estate, nevertheless, 41% of the YOI-based sample reported not having received helpful mental health support that they felt they needed. This apparent gap in support was reflected in focus group discussions at HMP & YOI Polmont, where some participants highlighted difficulties such as being unable to get a mental health appointment, suffering distress as a result of problems accessing appropriate psychiatric medication in a timely manner, and unwillingness to disclose mental health issues to staff for fear of what would happen to them. One respondent reported that:

“When I first came in I put a mental health referral in, but didn’t hear anything. I put it in about six times, and they were just like: ‘oh, you’ll be alright, you’ll be fine.’ It took for the seventh time and me kicking off a bit for them to actually do something.”

Similarly, a survey respondent commented that: “I have been waiting to see a psychiatrist since last year and [have] still not heard back”.

Some reported feeling that they were punished for having mental health problems, with TTM measures sometimes feeling punitive rather than supportive, and that this put them off seeking support from staff. As one explained:

“There are ‘safter cells’, but they use that as punishment; they put you in there for a punishment if you’re kicking off or having a bad day. They want to restrain you, pin you down, and fling you in there, and that’s not what you need. You need someone to listen to you.”

Another agreed, commenting that prisoners would be punished by being put on report for having mental health problems. As she put it, prisoners perceived the staff attitude towards poor mental health as: “Oh, you’re feeling sad, let’s put you on report”. This reflects earlier HMIPS findings from a review of mental health services

at HMP & YOI Polmont in 2019 (HMIPS 2019) which found that young people felt that mental health interventions such as the use of TTM and safer cells often felt punitive rather than supportive.

Reflecting the survey results, which showed that most (79%) young people in the adult estate who needed mental health did not feel that they had received helpful support, those who took part in focus groups in the adult estate were similarly negative about their experiences. Several young people in the adult estate described feeling that there was a lack of support for them, either from residential staff or the mental health team, to help manage their mental health conditions. They described long waits for appointments, and patchy support from the mental health team. As one young man explained:

“I’ve got [multiple mental health diagnoses] and they’re going out of control being stuck in here... I’ve got really bad mental health, right, I’m really bad for keeping it all in and then I’ll just go bang. I’ve been feeling lately, the last couple of weeks, I’m getting really close to just exploding... Like, there’s naebody to talk to in here, there’s no [support].”

Some focus group participants in the adult estate reported feeling that residential prison staff were not well trained or equipped to deal with people who struggle with their mental health. Some reported staff not picking up on warning signs such as behaviour changes, or not knowing how to deal with people whose mental health had reached crisis-point. Others reported staff appearing to deliberately wind up prisoners with poor mental health, causing them to breakdown. As in the YOI setting, several reported that they would be scared to disclose poor mental health or suicidal thoughts as they felt that this led to punishment rather than help. As one young man on an adult protection hall reported:

“See if you feel suicidal or whatever, they punish you for it, they take all your clothes off you and speak to you like shit... if you’re on Talk To Me they will put you on a different hall in mainstream and they’ll put a target on your back, and you’re getting escorted to the phone and all that.”

Another reported being treated “worse than a dog” when concerns were raised that he was suicidal.

Others highlighted difficulties and delays accessing the correct psychiatric medication, with being taken off medication on entry to prison highlighted as a particular difficulty for some with long-term psychiatric diagnoses.

Support for substance use

The survey data and data provided by SPS suggested that substance use was also an issue for a sizeable portion of the young prisoner population. More than one in three (36%) young people reported needing support for drug use, while almost one in three (29%) reported needing support for alcohol use, while in custody. SPS data showed that in the five day period of 23rd to 27th October 2023, 333 people were on

the Management of Offender at Risk Due to Substances (MORS),¹¹ of whom 11% were aged 25 or under. In this five-day snapshot, the percentage of young people on MORS was proportionate to the total population of young people in the Scottish prison estate (around 11%).

Of those who said they had needed support for alcohol and drug use, fewer than half of young prisoners reported having received support that had been helpful. In total, 44% of young people in the YOI who had needed support for alcohol use said they had received helpful support, and 44% said they had received helpful support for drug use. In contrast, among young people in the adult estate, of those who said they needed it, 19% said they had received helpful support for alcohol use, and 31% said they had received helpful support for drug use. However, the differences were not significant.¹² Among focus group participants, those who had access support for alcohol or drug use tended to report that it had been helpful, suggesting that the problem may lie more with issues of access rather than quality of services. However, some were sceptical that it would help them stay away from problematic substance use in the long-term, while others noted that it was difficult to stay away from drugs when they were prevalent on their wings.

A particular concern highlighted by some in the adult estate was that prisoners detoxing from drugs or alcohol on arrival in custody were not always well managed.

Healthy lifestyle

Finally, a concern raised by some young people in both the YOI setting and the adult estate were what they saw as barriers to maintaining a healthy lifestyle in custody. Several young people, particularly in the adult estate, felt that a key factor in their poor mental health, and in young people turning to substance misuse, was lack of opportunity for activity and mental stimulation, and too much time spent locked in their cells. As one young man put it, he and others were “going crazy” from the amount of time they were forced to spend locked up in their cells with nothing to do.

In addition, several reported that they had too little opportunity to exercise and had little or no access to the natural environment, while being provided with unhealthy, highly-processed meals with too few fruits and vegetables. They reported that this problem was exacerbated by a lack of healthy food options available to buy on the canteen, and were concerned about the impact on their mental and physical health.

Summary

Overall, this analysis demonstrates that in general, young people in the YOI setting were the most positive of the three groups about access to and usefulness of support provided for their physical and mental health. They generally reported good access to medical services, and more than half of those who had needed it said they

¹¹ MORS is used by prison and healthcare staff when a person in custody is found under the influence of an illicit substance to ensure appropriate management and care, and the preservation of life for that individual.

¹² Received helpful alcohol use support: ($X^2=2.55$, $df=2$, $p=.280$); received helpful support for drug use: ($X^2=4.47$, $df=2$, $p=.107$).

had received useful mental health support. However, this was less pronounced regarding drug and alcohol support.

There was a clear pattern of young people in the adult estate being the least likely of the three groups to report positive experiences on all measures, reporting poor access to all forms of healthcare they were asked about.

It was notable during focus groups in both settings that young people felt they needed more timely and better quality mental health care, and better support from staff to ensure that those with poor mental health were supported rather than punished.

Young adults in both settings also drew attention to the difficulties of ensuring good physical and mental health given the limited access they reported having to exercise, healthy food and mental stimulation.

Purposeful activity and Time Out of Cell

Background

Evidence from Scotland and across the UK suggests that young people in custody often have too little access to purposeful activity (for example, Armstrong and McGhee 2019, Harris 2015; HMIP 2021); meaningful activity that provides both mental and physical stimulation including education, training, counselling, family contact, sports and recreation time with other prisoners. This is of particular concern given the apparent benefits of purposeful activity for protecting against poor mental health, suicidal thoughts, suicide and self-harm (Armstrong and McGhee 2019; Harris 2015; Favril et al 2019; Dye 2010; Van Ginneken et al. 2017; Haney 2018).

Young people on remand are of particular concern given that there in Scotland there is generally less opportunity for remand prisoners to engage in purposeful activity than those serving sentences. Armstrong and McGhee (2019) point out that this is particularly problematic given that there is a heightened link between remand status and suicide risk.

Overview of findings

The concerns raised in the literature on Scotland and the wider UK about a lack of purposeful activity for young people are borne out to a large extent by the findings of this review. Comparatively high proportions of young people in the YOI setting reported easy access to education and skills training, and regular access to the gym and/or sports. However, they reported the most negative experiences regarding access to exercise in the fresh air and time out of cell. Many reported being locked up for at least 22 hours a day. Equally, while young people in the adult estate generally were able to spend more time out of their cells than those in the YOI setting, they reported comparatively poor access to education, training, employment and the library.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|---|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| It is easy to access education | 75% | 44% | 56% | Yes |
| It is easy to access skills training | 62% | 18% | 30% | Yes |
| It is easy to access prison jobs | 41% | 26% | 43% | Yes |
| They could go to the gym or play sports at least once during the previous week | 97% | 94% | 88% | Yes |
| They could go to the library at least once during the previous week | 58% | 43% | 51% | No |
| They could spend at least one hour outdoors in the fresh air every day during the previous week | 44% | 62% | 71% | Yes |
| They could spend more than two hours out of their cell during the previous week day | 54% | 67% | 72% | Yes |
| They could spend more than two hours out of their cell during the previous Saturday | 32% | 65% | 70% | Yes |

Education, training and jobs

Young people held in the YOI setting were more likely to say that it was easy to access education, training and jobs than young people held in the adult estate. Three quarters (75%) of young people in HMP & YOI Polmont reported that it was easy to access education, compared to less than half (44%) of young people elsewhere. Almost two-thirds (62%) of young people in Polmont said it was easy to access skills training compared to (18%) of young people held elsewhere. Forty-one per cent of those held in Polmont said it was easy to access jobs, compared to 26% of young people held elsewhere. The differences between the three comparison groups were statistically significant.¹³

Focus group participants in HMP & YOI Polmont who had accessed education were generally positive about it, with some feeling that the education they were receiving would help them on their release. As one participant explained:

“I’ve got qualifications while I’ve been here. When I was outside, I got kicked out of school, I didn’t know what I was going to do with myself, but since I’ve come in here, I can still get qualifications, I can use these qualifications to get a job”.

Many HMP & YOI Polmont focus group participants also had access to weekly youth work provided by Barnardo’s Scotland, a third sector organisation, which they generally spoke positively about. As one young person put it:

“The best help I have found since being here is from youth work. They help get people out of ourselves and interact with them... all the Barnardo’s Scotland staff are really nice and supportive, they also help train people to become peer mentors to support new boys coming in.”

Similarly, although only 41% said it was easy to access jobs, those in Polmont who had jobs were positive about this experience. One female respondent explained that she enjoyed the fact that her job kept her busy all day during the week, and this allowed her to enjoy the downtime necessitated by being locked up for much of the weekend:

“On weekdays I actually enjoy the routine: get up, work, lunch, exercise, locked in for an hour, then back to work, then dinner, then a couple of hours locked up then rec. So it’s actually not too bad. I actually cannae wait for weekend dub up.”

However, reflecting the survey results, several focus group participants highlighted difficulties in accessing jobs, including a lack of jobs available and a long waiting list.

Reflecting the survey results, those held in the adult male estate were less positive, and some compared their current experience negatively to experiences they had had

¹³ Ease of access to education: ($X^2= 12.64$, $df= 2$, $p= .002$); ease of access to skills training: ($X^2= 29.23$, $df= 2$, $p= <.001$); ease of access to prison jobs ($X^2= 6.27$, $df= 2$, $p= .044$).

in Polmont, noting that there was much less opportunity to engage in purposeful activity in the adult estate. As one put it:

“[Purposeful activity in] Polmont was a complete different ballgame... if I could go back to Polmont I'd go in a heartbeat”.

They reported that there were long waiting lists to access education, that there was too little education, training and employment available, that many who wanted jobs could not access them, and that there was a lack of training and qualifications geared towards the types of jobs that people with convictions would be able to apply for. Those on remand found it particularly difficult or impossible to access these types of purposeful activity, with some noting that there was no education available for those on remand, and that jobs were difficult to access and some only gave half an hour's work each day.

Those who had stayed in multiple adult prisons reported that the opportunities for education and other purposeful activity varied substantially between prisons. One young man, for example reported having felt busy in a previous prison, where he had been able to attend three different education courses, allowing him to spend a substantial amount of time in classes each week. Another young man described the difference between the offerings of two adult prisons he had been in as “like night and day”.

Time out of cell

Of particular concern was the amount of time young people spent locked in their cells. Among those in the YOI setting without jobs there was a general consensus that there was too little to do to pass the time, and too much time spent alone locked in their cells. As one respondent reported:

“I've been in my room nearly three days this week because I have nothing on; we're dined in [eating meals in their own cells], we're not getting any rec or anything.”

Another commented that other than a small amount of education, recreation and youth work, “you just sit in your gaff” watching TV all day.

These observations were supported by the survey results. Of the three groups, young people in the YOI setting reported spending the least amount of time out of their cells, with 54% saying they could spend more than two hours out of their cell during the previous weekday, dropping to 32% for the previous Saturday. By comparison 67% of young people in the adult estate said they could spend more than two hours out of their cells on the previous weekday, and 65% on the previous Saturday, these rates were slightly lower than for older adults. Both sets of differences were statistically significant.¹⁴

¹⁴ Time out of cell during previous weekday: ($X^2= 9.86$, $df= 2$, $p= .007$); time out of cell during previous Saturday ($X^2= 39.98$, $df= 2$, $p= <.001$).

Although these results show that a greater proportion of young people in the adult estate were able to spend more than two hours out of their cells, many taking part in the focus groups nevertheless reported struggling with the vast amount of time spent locked in their cells, often sharing a small space with another prisoner. They described the boredom and frustration this caused, and a sense that they were wasting time that could be spent learning, training, and bettering themselves. As one young person in the adult estate put it:

“See being locked up 23 hours a day with the same person, with nae chance of a break, it just creates a powder keg”, while another one said: “it just makes you want to give up”.

They also highlighted concerns about the effect this had on their own and others' mental health, and the likelihood of turning to drugs to combat the boredom and social isolation of so much time spent locked up. As one young man explained:

“It's mental, I don't know how many people kill themselves in here, but I wouldnae be surprised why they do ... I can put up with things, but I cannae put up with this any longer, it's a joke ... the way I'm speaking is the way the whole hall is speaking, see even just nighttime rec [being added to the regime], that would make the world of difference to this place”.

The young people suggested that minor changes would make a substantial difference to their lives. As one young man put it:

“If you are out of the cell more, if you get rec every day, if you get a shower every day, these basic things will make you feel much better – those two hours that you have out of your cell instead of one, you'll feel free, it'll make a big difference... even if you got offered an extra 10 minutes a day, you'd be over the moon”.

Given the large amount of time young people were spending locked in their cells in both settings, a frequently raised issue in focus groups was that the move from hall phones to in-cell phones had removed a key opportunity for prisoners to leave their cells. Previously, prisoners needed to leave their cells to access a phone on their wing, whereas now they had access to a phone in their own cell. While young people in single cells were generally grateful for the greater level of privacy this gave them for making phone calls, their disappointment at this loss of opportunity to leave their cells is indicative of the extent to which many young people were struggling with the amount of time spent locked up. Moreover, those who shared cells reported finding it difficult to find times when they could have private conversations because it was rare that they would be alone in their cell (see Family Contact section).

Access to exercise and other activities

The data showed that young people had high rates of weekly access to the gym and/or sports – 97% of those in YOIs and 94% young people in the adult estate. However, many young people reported that their access to their legal daily entitlement – under Rule 87.1 of the Prison Rules – of one hour of exercise in the fresh air was not met. Less than half (44%) of those in the YOI setting reported

getting access to an hour a day of exercise, rising to 62% for young people in the adult estate. In focus groups, many YOI-based young people reported that exercise was often cancelled, that it tended only to last 30 or 45 minutes, and that some people could not access it because different wings were mixed for exercise, so those with enemies in the other wing had to stay in their cells.

Relatively low rates of young people reported being able to access the library each week. Just over half (58%) of young people in the YOI setting reported being able to access the library at least once a week, dropping to less than half (44%) of young people held in the adult estate. However the differences between the three groups were not significant ($X^2= 2.37$, $df= 2$, $p= .205$). In one adult prison it was reported that the library could only be accessed by those who were attending education classes.

Summary

A recurrent theme when examining young people's access to purposeful activity is one of a lack of opportunity for meaningful activity and too many young people spent locked in their cells for up to 22 hours a day with little to do. This is in stark contrast to SPS's stated aim "to use the time a young person spends in custody to enable them to prepare for a positive future".

Of particular concern was the amount of time young people in the YOI spent locked in their cells, the lack of access in HMP & YOI Polmont to prisoners' right under Rule 87.1 to at least an hour of exercise in the fresh air, and the lack of access to education, training and employment for young people in the adult estate.

Young people in both settings reported finding it difficult to cope with the lack of activity and the amount of time spent locked in their cells, finding it mentally challenging and frustrating to feel that they could be using the time to rehabilitate themselves.

Family Contact

Background

Research suggests that family contact is vitally important to supporting young people's wellbeing in prison. Maintaining family contact has been shown to help young people mitigate their vulnerabilities and feelings of isolation, reduce the risk of suicide and self-harm, and reduce the risk of reoffending (Armstrong and McGhee 2019; Harris 2015; Slade and Forrester 2015; Dye 2010; Brown and Day 2008). In particular, the Harris report (2015) noted that young prisoners often particularly want to speak with their mothers or other close family members when in distress, while withholding their distress from officers or other prisoners.

Overview of findings

Overall, young people in the YOI setting were more positive about their ability to stay in touch with their families than young people and older adults in the adult estate. Those in the YOI setting were more likely to say they had an opportunity to access visits at least once a week, that their visitors were treated with respect, and that they had access to a personal phone. Despite the evidence on the importance of maintaining family contact to supporting young people through their time in prison and mitigating the risk of reoffending, over 40% of young people in the adult estate, and over 25% of those in the YOI setting reported not having the opportunity for an in-person visit at least once a week.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|---|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| They have had a chance to have an in-person visit with family or friends every week | 76% | 58% | 58% | Yes |
| Their visitors are treated with respect all or most of the time by staff | 79% | 62% | 57% | Yes |
| They have access to a prison-issued personal phone | 96% | 74% | 77% | Yes |

Visits

Just over three quarters (76%) of young people in the YOI setting reported that they were given the opportunity to have visits every week. This dropped to 58% for both young people and older adults held in the adult estate. These differences were statistically significant ($X^2= 7.50$, $df= 2$, $p= .024$). Comments from focus group participants in HMP & YOI Polmont generally supported the view that there was relatively good access to visits, although some noted that it could be difficult to access visits due to the need to keep them apart from enemies. Several participants highlighted issues with video visits, including not knowing how to access them, poor connections, and technological and administrative errors causing these visits to fail.

In the adult estate, some young people raised issues regarding the number of visits they were entitled to. For example, many on remand reported only being given

access to between two and four visits per week, short of the daily weekday visits they are entitled to under Rule 64.2. of the Prison Rules.¹⁵ The other main issue highlighted in focus groups was the time allowed for visits: several people reported losing some or all of their virtual visit time to technical issues, and others said that visits often did not last the full 45 minutes that should have been allocated to them.

Over three quarters of young people in the YOI setting (79%) reported that their visitors were treated with respect most or all of the time, however, this dropped to 62% for young people in the adult estate. These differences were statistically significant ($X^2= 10.86$, $df= 2$, $p= .004$).

Phone access

Almost all (96%) of young people in the YOI setting reported having access to an in-cell personal phone, compared to 74% of young people in the adult estate. The differences in these results were statistically significant ($X^2= 13.11$, $df= 2$, $p= .001$). Reflecting these findings, focus group participants at HMP & YOI Polmont were generally positive about in-cell phone access, noting that it allowed them greater privacy than using a communal hall phone.

This was not reflected among young people in the adult estate, many of whom shared cells. As one young man explained:

“We’ve got a landline [in-cell] but you can’t even get a private conversation [because of sharing a cell]. I know someone whose parent has just died and he’s been asking to use the phone on the landing, and they’re [the staff] like ‘no’, so you have to sit and talk about your dead family member when there is someone in the room that can hear you... you basically have to sit with your fingers in your ears while your co-pilot [cell-mate] is on the phone”.

Young people in both settings felt that phone credit was too expensive in relation to wages – particularly for those without jobs – meaning it was difficult for them to top up their monthly allowance of 200 minutes. It was a common concern that canteen prices had risen while wages had not, with a knock-on effect that participants reported having less money available after ordering what they needed from the canteen to spend on phone credit. Some highlighted that it was difficult to stay in contact with family with only 200 minutes per month, especially if they had children.

Summary

Young people in the YOI setting tended to report relatively positive experiences in relation to family contact, although around one quarter reported not having the opportunity for at least one in-person visit per week.

Meanwhile, over 40% of young people in the adult estate reported not getting access to at least one weekly visit, and remand prisoners in some establishments reported not being offered the daily visits they are legally entitled to.

¹⁵ The Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions (Scotland) Rules 2011: [The Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions \(Scotland\) Rules 2011 \(legislation.gov.uk\)](http://legislation.gov.uk)

While almost all young people in the YOI setting were able to access a personal phone and have private conversations with family members in their cells, this was less likely for young people in the adult estate, an issue compounded by the fact that many young people in the adult estate live in shared cells.

Transitions and Progression

Background

Several UK studies have recognised that transitions into, between, and out of custodial settings are particularly challenging and high-stress periods for young people (Harris Review 2005; Harvey 2005; House of Commons 2016). As Harvey (2005) puts it, initial entry to prison can be “particularly distressing for prisoners and ... a period of heightened vulnerability to suicide and self-harm”. Harvey’s study highlighted the themes of “uncertainty, losing control and freedom, separation and loss, and a preoccupation with safety” as running through newly-admitted young prisoners’ concerns.

Similarly, transfers from YOIs to adult prisons have been highlighted as particularly stressful, especially when accompanied by the loss of the additional support services generally available in YOIs (Harvey 2005; Price 2021; Harris 2015). In the context of the wider UK, the Harris Review highlights that the early days in any establishment, whether following initial arrival into custody or a transfer, are periods of increased risk for young prisoners (Harris 2015).

Finally, there are concerns about young people’s transitions back into the community, with some evidence to suggest that young adults are more likely to be reconvicted within a year of being released than other age groups. According to Scottish Government statistics for 2018-19, those aged under 21 had the highest rate of reconviction within one year of all age groups (at 33.7%), and the highest average number of reconvictions within a year per offender (0.62). Similarly, those aged 21-25 had a reconviction rate of 31.2% and the average number of reconvictions per offender was 0.51 (Scottish Government, 2021). Evidence from elsewhere in the UK shows that “75% [of young prisoners] are reconvicted within two years of release from prison” (House of Commons 2016).

Overview of findings

Overall, the findings of this review reflect many of the concerns highlighted in the existing literature on young people’s experiences of transitions into and out of the prison establishments. The limited amount of data available from the pre-inspection survey indicates that, in general, some basic requirements were being met on arrival, and, with some exceptions, focus group participants tended to report being treated reasonably well in reception.

However, those taking part in focus groups reported facing challenges regarding transitions out of prison. In particular, many expressed anxiety about their preparedness for life outside prison as a result of feeling they were not being supported to rehabilitate or gain the skills needed to live successfully in the community and stay out of the criminal justice system.

| Respondents reporting that: | YPs in YOI (<23) | YPs in adult estate (21-25) | Older adults (>25) | Significant difference? |
|--|------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------------|
| They were treated well or neutrally in reception on arrival at their current prison | 99% | 92% | 89% | Yes |
| They were offered an induction on arrival at their current establishment | 67% | 47% | 62% | No |
| They were seen by a health professional for an assessment of their health needs within 24 hours of arrival | 90% | 87% | 89% | No |

Arrival at YOI

Reflecting the general view in the literature, focus group participants spoke of their arrival into custody as an unsettling and scary time, with those in HMP & YOI Polmont describing feeling “very scared” and “nervous”. As one young man described it:

“It [arriving at HMP & YOI Polmont] was just a crazy experience, you get that feeling in your stomach, nobody can say they didnae get that”.

However, several of those held in Polmont reported that their experience there had not been as bad as they had feared. The majority of those held in a YOI setting reported having been offered an induction on arrival (67%), having been seen by a health professional for an assessment within 24 hours (90%), and having been treated well or neutrally in reception on arrival (99%).

However, it was clear from focus group discussions with young males and females at HMP & YOI Polmont that there were gaps in the induction processes for young people held there. Several participants reported receiving no or very limited induction information. One, for instance said that he received no induction “other than a bit of paper” while another explained that: “you don’t know the ropes at all; a peer mentor should step in at that point but they don’t.” And another explained:

“Aye, induction, it was like a screen and slideshows of how to do this and that... just talking, it didn’t explain anything... [so] you’re sitting behind your [cell] door going ‘what’s going on.’”

Arrival and transfers to the adult estate

A large proportion of young people held in the adult estate (92%) reported being treated well or neutrally on arrival at the prison, and the majority (87%) reported having their health needs assessed within 24 hours of arrival. However, less than half (47%) reported having been offered an induction.

On the whole, mainstream focus group participants reported being treated well on their arrival at adult establishments. However, some of those on protection recounted difficult experiences as a result of initially being located in mixed-population first night centre facilities. They reported being unable to go out to exercise or even shower

regularly because they were not allowed to mix with others on their hall. As one young man put it, those on protection are:

“...treated like an animal basically [when you arrive]; it depends what hall you're on, me coming in as [a] protection [prisoner], so when you're in a mainstream hall [in the first night centre] you don't get treated well at all.”

A particular problem some young people highlighted in focus groups was having medication removed or changed when moving between establishments, with reports of this causing negative mental and physical side effects.

A small number of focus group participants had experienced being transferred from HMP & YOI Polmont to the adult estate. In some cases, these transitions were described as being abrupt and unexplained. One young person, for example, explained that he was given no warning or preparation for his transfer; rather he “was just shoved on the bus” and taken to an adult prison. Such reports, coupled with an apparently more negative experience of arrival in the adult estate compared to the YOI setting raise questions about whether more could or should be done to support young people arriving in the adult estate.

Progression

Young people in the YOI setting highlighted several issues relating to their preparation for release. One recurrent theme was difficulties arising from failures in the progression system.¹⁶ First, some on longer sentences voiced their frustration at the lack of opportunity to undertake the programmes necessary for them to progress through their sentences, due to extremely long waiting lists. As a result, they knew that they would be unlikely to be successful in a parole application. As one young man explained:

“The parole board are looking for have you done any index offending programmes, and nine times out of ten, the answer is no.”

This was particularly problematic for those who needed to undertake programmes relating to sex offences, as these were not available in HMP & YOI Polmont, and they would not be eligible to apply for a transfer to a prison where they were available until they turned 21. As one young man in a protection hall explained:

“If you're an SO [sex offender], we get offered no programmes [while in the YOI], so people are in for like five years, going up for parole three or four times knowing they're getting knocked back because the parole board's telling them they need to do programmes, but they're not offering them to us to do. It's stupid... there are no programmes at all for sex offenders [at Polmont]. Even if I turn 21 and put in for a transfer, all the other jails are bursting.”

Another reported that he had not had his initial Generic Programme Assessment (GPA), which is needed to assess what programmes a prisoner will need to

¹⁶ This is a subject of significant concern to HMIPS, and is the subject of a forthcoming HMIPS thematic review.

undertake while in prison, and was never given any information about his case or what he needed to do to progress.

Given these frustrations, some young people in Polmont saw moving to the adult estate as an exciting opportunity, as they anticipated being able to do their programmes, rehabilitate and move on with their lives. As one young man in Polmont explained:

“I am just looking forward to doing my programmes, they are meant to be really good for targeting your mindset... I'm choking to do them, I cannae wait to do my programmes and see what they're all about”.

However, despite this enthusiasm, the evidence from the adult estate suggested that such enthusiasm would often result in disappointment. Those in the adult estate voiced similar frustrations to those in Polmont, with focus group participants reporting waiting over two years for Generic Programme Assessments (GPAs), and several years to access the programmes they needed. Like those in HMP & YOI Polmont, some were held in prisons that did not run the programmes they needed to undertake. As a result, they commonly reported expecting not to get a chance to do their programmes and achieve parole before completing their full sentences.

Preparation for release

Among YOI focus group participants, perceptions about their preparedness for release varied depending on the type of prisoner. Those in male mainstream convicted halls tended to be relatively positive, reporting that they had been able to prepare for life outside prison, including by getting qualifications that they had missed out on at school and which they hoped would help them find jobs.

However, others in the YOI setting were worried about being released, and reported feeling that they had not been given any help to avoid reconviction. As one male participant commented: “I've not had any rehabilitation work or anything like that”. This was a common sentiment among males and females. One participant noted that:

“It's meant to be about rehabilitating you but they don't do any of that, there's nae programmes, nae offending work, especially if you are on remand. See remand prisoners, you could stop them coming back in if you did some of the stuff you do with convicted prisoners, coz remand prisoners who are here for five, six, seven months are just here, doing the same thing every single day, fighting. Naebody is helping them... You could stop so many boys reoffending if you got them all when they are on remand”.

As well as concerns that they were not receiving support for rehabilitation, some highlighted a feeling that there was not enough practical support available to people leaving Polmont. As one young person explained:

“Leaving here and going into that world again, not knowing how to start your benefits, the housing, restarting relationships, you just don't know, it's scary – what if you're not told any of that, and I go back to my old ways and I end up

back [in prison again] because I've not been told how to go about doing certain things that need to be done?"

Another commented that although he felt empowered by the qualifications he had gained in Polmont and felt that there was now potential for him to "start afresh", he worried that he would be given little practical support to do so:

"...the chance to prepare for release is way too out of our control. I don't get to call housing myself to get put on a waiting list for [accommodation]... We only get four weeks to discuss options and the day of release we have one day to find a place to stop. [It's] not easy to start afresh."

While some who were currently in the adult estate reported positive experiences of leaving Polmont in the past, others reported similarly negative experiences, feeling that they had not always been given enough support, particularly those released during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concerns about preparation for release raised by those in the YOI setting were amplified among those held in the adult estate, with similar concerns regarding a lack of support to organising things such as housing, benefits, and jobs for their release. While one young man told us that he had had support from outside the prison to get housing put in place, another reported that:

"When you get out, you have to start all over again – you don't get enough support to do that, you don't get enough support in the build-up [to release]".

The majority of participants in the adult estate expressed frustration at the lack of rehabilitative work provided in prison, reporting that rather than being given a chance to prepare to restart their lives on release, they were merely "in the waiting room", with little to do and no support to address their offending behaviour, avoid reoffending, or enhance their employability. As one young man summarised the general view:

"They're expecting people to come here, rehabilitate, and move on to be a member of society... the best thing they could do is help us get an education, get some skills to get a job and start moving on because if you don't have a job you just get isolated and then folk are going to reoffend... it's just a revolving door... there's nae rehabilitation in this jail".

One young man, when asked whether he had been given any rehabilitative support while in the adult estate responded that instead of rehabilitation:

"[Prison] has ruined me, it's completely ruined me".

Those convicted of sex offences were particularly concerned about their prospects upon release. They worried that because it took so long to access rehabilitative programmes, they would complete their full sentences before accessing these, and therefore continue to be seen as "high-risk" to employers, having had no opportunity in prison to demonstrate that they had rehabilitated themselves and decreased their risk. Moreover, they reported feeling trapped in a Catch-22 situation whereby they

were offered education courses within the prison which would give them qualifications that they would not be able to use in the community as a result of the nature of their prior convictions, but which would over-qualify them for the types of jobs that they would be more likely to be offered. They often felt that the prison did not give them skills training for, or education about, the types of jobs that those with sex offence convictions would be able to undertake after release. As a result, they were worried that they would fail to find jobs on leaving prison, something exacerbated by the sense that they were, as one young man put it, stained for life by "mistakes made when we were very young".

Uneven distribution of rehabilitative support

Finally, some of those who had stayed in more than one adult establishment expressed frustration at the uneven distribution of rehabilitative support across different prisons. They noted that access to education, vocational activity, work and programmes, as well as the motivation provided by staff and the wider regime, dictated to a large extent by which establishment they were held in and the category of prisoner. As one young man, who had spent time in two different adult establishments summarised:

"In here it's bad for just being left [alone with nothing to do]. In [a different adult prison] the rehabilitation kind of thing was good, being able to go to classes and do things ... I spent [several] weeks there and the time flew – I felt like I was actually in a happier place, my mum seen the difference in me and everything, and I was saying 'look, I'm going to be a better person when I come out of here, I'm doing well for myself'. I was actually in the frame of mind of wanting to turn my life around. Then I got brought here and you're just slapped in a cell, and you've got screws that just talk to you cheekily and you're just like, 'what the hell?', like it doesn't make me feel like I'm wanting to do better the now – it just puts an underlying stress on you, to be honest".

Summary

Overall, transitions were a clear cause for concern among young people in both the YOI setting and the adult estate, particularly the transition out of prison and back into the community.

The survey data is indicative of patchy support on arrival, with those entering the adult estate apparently less likely to be given support than those entering the YOI setting. Focus group participants noted that even when they were offered inductions, these were not necessarily particularly helpful.

While some young people in the YOI expressed enthusiasm to begin their programmes and work on rehabilitation in preparation for returning to the community, a common theme among both sets of young people was a lack of rehabilitative opportunity. This, they felt, led instead to prolonged incarceration and anxiety about their preparedness for release. There was a strong sense that despite a willingness for rehabilitation, many young people were simply waiting for release, and in some cases losing faith in their desire to improve themselves while they did so, rather than

being given the opportunity to actively prepare themselves for a successful life in the community.

Conclusions

The primary aim of the SPS's Vision for Young People in Custody: 2021 is "to use the time a young person spends in custody to enable them to prepare for a positive future." Aimed at supporting those aged 16-21, it seeks to give these young people in custody the best chance of rehabilitating and reintegrating into society, moving out of the cycle of crime once they are liberated. The evidence presented in this review suggests that for this young cohort, held in HMP & YOI Polmont, particularly those on convicted halls, they generally feel relatively well supported, reporting positive relationships with staff, good access to healthcare and good access to purposeful activity. There are caveats though, with the data indicating that young people were spending too little time out of their cells, and not always getting access to entitlements such as one hour a day of fresh air.

However, the experiences of those young people aged 21-25, living in the general adult population across the prison estate, appeared to be markedly different. They reported more negative experiences across many aspects of prison life, from purposeful activity to relationships with staff, to health and wellbeing. While some young people taking part in focus groups in Polmont commonly spoke with enthusiasm about the education and qualifications they were gaining and the opportunities they believed they would be given for rehabilitation, those in the adult estate were generally much more negative and far less optimistic about their futures.

Given that the majority of those aged under 25 are held in the adult estate, this raises concerns about whether most young people receive the support they need, particularly given the evidence on the vulnerability and continuing emotional and cognitive development of young prisoners. It also raises the question of whether any positive changes young people make to their lives while in the YOI setting, and any benefits conferred by the relatively positive experiences they have there, are lost after they move to the adult estate.

Overall, the following individual conclusions of this report are:

Vulnerabilities in the Young Adult Prison Population: Self-reporting via the HMIPS pre-inspection survey suggests a high level of vulnerability within the young prison population, with, for example, three in five having been in the care system, seven in 10 reporting a need for mental health support while incarcerated, and two in five having a disability or long-term health condition.

Drop-off in Positive Experience Outside the YOI setting: Overall, there is a pattern of young people in the YOI setting reporting having a more positive experience than young people in the adult estate. Meanwhile, young people held in the adult estate frequently tended to report the most negative experiences of the three comparison groups.

Substantial Variation in Experiences across the Estate: While the quantitative findings show that young people have different experiences depending on whether they are in the YOI or the adult estate, within both these settings the qualitative evidence suggests that experiences vary substantially depending on the category of

prisoner (remand, mainstream, protection), the hall they are held on, and, in the adult estate, the establishment they are held in.

Relationships with Staff: Young people held in the YOI setting were more positive than those in the adult estate about their relationships with staff, raising concerns about a potential lack of practical and emotional support for young people held in the adult estate. Those taking part in YOI focus groups reported mixed experiences depending on what type of prisoner they were and where they were located. Convicted male prisoners in the YOI spoke much more positively about their relationships with staff than females or remanded males.

Getting Help: A recurrent theme in focus groups, particularly among young people on remand and those held in the adult estate, was a lack of trust in the people and systems in place to support prisoners such as prison officers and the complaints system. There were examples of good practice, however, such as the provision of youth work services and the training of peer mentors by the third-sector organisation Barnardo's Scotland.

Safety: Feelings of safety presented a mixed picture. While young people in the adult estate were less likely to report having been abused by fellow prisoners than young people in the YOI setting, they were also less likely to report feeling safe all or most of the time, and more likely to report having witnessed or experienced abuse by prison staff. Overall, young people in the YOI setting were the most likely of all three groups to report feeling safe all or most of the time (77%).

Health and Wellbeing: Overall, young people in the YOI setting were the most positive about their healthcare and wellbeing, while young people in the adult estate were least positive. Their survey responses suggested particular difficulties in accessing key medical services in the adult estate. Particular concerns raised included shortcomings in mental health support in both settings, with some reporting that they did not feel their mental health was taken seriously, and that residential staff could be punitive and unsupportive when dealing with young people with poor mental health. Support for substance use and access to medication were also highlighted as causes for concern. Young adults from both settings who took part in focus groups drew attention to the difficulties of ensuring good physical and mental health given the limited access they reported having to exercise, healthy food and mental stimulation.

Purposeful Activity: Overall, there was an apparent lack of purposeful activity for young people across the Scottish prison estate, leading to boredom, frustration, and worsening mental health. Comparatively high proportions of young people in the YOI setting reported easy access to education and skills training, and regular access to the gym and/or sports. However, their relative lack of access to their daily entitlement of one hour a day of exercise, and the long periods they were spending locked in their cells – many of them reporting being locked up for 22 hours a day – is a cause for concern. Equally, while young people in the adult estate generally were able to spend more time out of their cells than those in the YOI setting, they reported comparatively poor access to education, training, employment and the library.

Family Contact: Overall, young people in the YOI setting tended to report relatively positive experiences in relation to family contact. Despite the known importance of maintaining family contact to support young people through their time in custody, over 40% of young people in the adult estate, and around a quarter of young people in the YOI setting, reported not getting access to at least one weekly visit, and remand prisoners in some establishments reported not being able to access the daily visits they were entitled to.

Transitions: Experiences of transitions into custody tended to be more negative among young people moving into the adult estate in comparison with those arriving into the YOI setting. Despite many young people expressing a desire to change, rehabilitate and stay out of prison in the future, many reported not being given the rehabilitative or practical support to do so while in custody. They expressed frustration at the barriers they faced when applying for parole due to the failings in the progression system, and worried about not being given adequate support to cope outside prison on release.

The Importance of the Little Things: Throughout the review, young people highlighted small changes that they felt could make a major difference to how they felt in prison, their mental health, and their motivation to better themselves. Examples included: being treated consistently by officers; being treated and spoken to with respect by officers; removing uncertainty by being given information on how long they needed to wait, and progress updates to access things like medical services, programmes and complaints procedures; being given more time for social interaction and activity; and not having activities, exercise and visits cancelled or cut short.

Appendix 1: Glossary

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| ACE | Adverse Childhood Experiences |
| GPA | Generic Programme Assessment |
| HMIPS | His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons for Scotland |
| HMP | His Majesty's Prison |
| IPM | Independent Prison Monitor |
| MORS | Management of Offender at Risk Due to Substances |
| Personal Officer | An individual prison officer assigned to a prisoner as their first point of contact for information, advice and support |
| Prison Rules | Prison Rules - The Prisons and Young Offenders Institutions (Scotland) Rules 2011 |
| SPS | Scottish Prison Service |
| TTM | Talk to Me |
| UoF | Use of Force |
| YJIB | Youth Justice Improvement Board |
| YOI | Young Offenders Institution |

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