



Reimagining justice for children and young adults: Annmarie Lewis OBE

My name is Annmarie Lewis. I lead criminal justice at Barrow Cadbury Trust, I am a Race Equity Associate for the Youth Endowment Fund, and I am currently leading the Young Adult Justice Transformed project, which is an evidence-led initiative to develop a clear vision and blueprint for a reimagined justice system for young adults.

I have worked across pretty much every aspect of this system over more than thirty years, from custodial settings to youth offending services, from national policy to the community and voluntary sector, from founding my own social enterprise to strategic leadership in HMPPS. I am passionate about this work, not only professionally but personally, because I have seen at close range, throughout my life, both what this system does to people and what a genuinely different approach can make possible.

So let me get straight to the most important premise.

People often talk about the criminal justice system as though it is broken. As though, with enough reform, enough investment, enough political will, we could fix it. I want to offer a more uncomfortable analysis than that.

This system is not broken, because in truth it is doing precisely what it was designed to do. The question is whether what it was designed to do is just, whether it is effective, and whether it is in any way proportionate to the scale of human suffering it generates. And on all three counts, the honest answer is no.

Prisons do not disappear social problems. They disappear human beings.

Angela Davis

The criminal justice system as it currently operates is itself criminogenic. It continues to create the very conditions that produce further crime, further harm, and further suffering, for those who pass through it, for those who work within it, and for the communities it is supposed to serve. It provides little genuine justice for victims, minimal rehabilitation for those who offend, and enormous cost to the public purse. The evidence for this has been accumulated carefully over decades. What has been lacking is not evidence. It has been the practical and political courage to act on it.

And that is precisely why a complete reimagining, not incremental reform, but a fundamental rethinking of what this system is for, who it serves, and how it operates is now not just desirable but critical.

Which brings me to the question at the heart of this session: why must we talk about children and young adults together? Because they are intrinsically intertwined. We cannot understand young adults in the justice system without understanding how they got there. And we cannot talk about children in the system without understanding where the current trajectory leads them. It is the same journey. The same pipeline. And every cliff edge we permit at 18, every moment we stop treating a developing child and young adult as exactly that, is a deliberate policy choice with a measurable human cost.

Consider what this means in practice. Under the proposed Crime and Policing Bill, a 17-year-old caught up in County Lines exploitation is considered a victim, they should be safeguarded, supported, diverted. Turn 18 the next day, and the same person, the same exploitation, the same trauma, can face up to ten years in prison. That is not a legal anomaly. That is adultification protected in statute and given a legal certificate.

The evidence on where this leads is stark. The Youth Justice System in England and Wales, as Case and Haines put it plainly, 'continues to be inefficient, expensive and strikingly ineffective. The justice system is failing, and continues to harm, children and young adults, and it is failing society.' The proven reoffending rate for children on a Youth Rehabilitation Order was 58.5% in the year ending June 2023 and has remained consistently above 50% for five consecutive years. When more than half of those we sentence go on to reoffend, that is not a rehabilitation system. That is a recycling system.

Inequalities

Now I want to address the inequalities picture: because the data here are among the most troubling indictments of the current system.

The racial disparities are stark and worsening. Black children have the highest proven reoffending rate at 38.9%, compared to 35.3% for white children. In London, 69% of children arrested are from ethnic minority backgrounds, compared to just 17% in the rest of England and Wales. Black children are four times more likely to be arrested nationally. Black young adults appear in court at over three times the rate of white young adults for serious offences, are 1.5 times more likely to receive a custodial sentence for equivalent low-level offences and serve sentences 80% longer on average. A recent Youth Endowment Fund study found that Black children are 15% less likely to be diverted from the criminal justice system, even with identical offending profiles. These are not anomalies. They are the system operating as designed.

Gypsy, Roma, and Traveller children face some of the most entrenched and historically rooted forms of criminalisation in Britain and some of the most invisible. Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children represent a tiny fraction of the general population, yet they are vastly overrepresented in secure training centres and youth custody.

Research documented that Gypsy, Roma and Traveller children made up approximately 12% of those in the secure estate, a figure that rose to around 15% by 2020, despite constituting less than 1% of the population.

White Gypsy and Roma pupils experience permanent school exclusion rates of 43 per 10,000 pupils, more than three times the rate for White British pupils, and child poverty rates of 56%, the highest of any ethnic group in England. The 2022 Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act deepened this structural harm further by criminalising nomadic ways of life outright. At the point of remand, Gypsy, Roma and Traveller young adults face a compounding injustice: lack of fixed address is routinely treated by courts as a flight risk indicator without evidential basis, cultural bias dressed up as risk assessment.

Girls and young women represent a minority of the justice population, but those who enter the system often present with the most severe and complex needs of all. Approximately 80% of young women in custody report mental health problems. Between three-quarters and 90% of girls in the youth justice system have experienced abuse from a family member or trusted person. 63% of young women serving sentences in the community have experienced rape or domestic abuse. And yet when a girl turns 18, she moves directly from the youth estate into an adult women's prison, no intermediate provision, no young adult women's estate, placed alongside significantly older women without the developmental or therapeutic support her circumstances demand. The cliff edge is steeper for girls than for anyone else in this system.

And care-experienced children and young adults occupy perhaps the starkest position of all. They account for less than 1% of the child population, yet around a quarter of the youth custody population. One in three young men in custody is a care leaver. For young women, it is over 60%. These are the predictable consequences of a corporate parenting model that routinely criminalises the survival behaviours of the children it is supposed to protect, where everyday conflict in residential care, instead of being managed as it would be within a family, is escalated into criminal justice contact. The state removes children from harm, creates the conditions for further harm, and then punishes them for it.

And critically, these are not separate populations experiencing separate injustices. They are frequently the same young people, the Black care-experienced girl who is also a victim of exploitation; the Gypsy, Roma and/or Traveller young man whose nomadic identity is read by every institution he encounters as a risk factor; the young woman whose trauma is criminalised at every turn. Those who sit at the intersection of multiple disadvantages are not just over-represented, they are systemically abandoned, at every stage, by every part of the system that should have caught them.

Young adult staff

There is one further dimension of this crisis that is rarely spoken about but is critical to any honest analysis: young adult staff. Approximately 11.4% of all police officers in England and Wales are aged 25 or under, and between 2020 and 2022, 55% of all new officer recruits were in that bracket. A significant proportion of frontline prison staff sit in the same age range. Many arrive with real ambition and a genuine commitment to change, and enter institutions whose cultures are resistant, whose support structures are inadequate, and whose environments are psychologically damaging. Without clinical supervision, without reflective practice, without investment in their own wellbeing, they are progressively absorbed into the very institutional cultures they came to challenge. What I have called the prison-to-prison pipeline is not just about those detained, it is about those employed.

A young officer, full of idealism, finds themselves without support, without mentorship, without outlet for moral distress. Over time, some cross lines they would never have imagined crossing. They end up sacked, prosecuted, and in the worst cases serving time in the very institution where they once wore a uniform. The system creates the conditions for this. It is predictable. It is preventable. Two groups. One crisis. We are failing both.

Enough talking. Enough reports. Enough incremental change that leaves the same children in the same cells. What we need, what these young people deserve, is radical reform and total transformation. And we are the people to demand it.

If not us, who? If not now, when?

So, what does a better approach actually look like?

Two concepts are central to this panel and widely misunderstood: early intervention and diversion.

Early intervention does not mean intervening when someone is first arrested. Genuine early intervention means starting at primary school age, responding to the conditions we know, with certainty, predict justice involvement: family instability, school exclusion, housing insecurity, poverty, exposure to violence, trauma, abuse. Department for Education research tracking young people in custody found that 90% of them shared the same identifiable turning points in their lives, moments where a different response could have changed the trajectory, from as young as age four. We are not failing these young people at 17 or 18. We are failing them in primary school. And then spending enormous sums of public money managing the consequences of that failure in the most expensive and least effective way possible.

Diversion means creating genuine alternatives to formal criminal justice processing at first or low-level contact, before involvement becomes entrenched. The Youth Endowment Fund's pre-court diversion toolkit is clear: diversion reduces reoffending, reduces long-term system costs, and does not compromise public safety. Most people in this room know what good diversion looks like, you are delivering it. But let me name three models that together illustrate the range.

DIVERT, operating inside Metropolitan Police custody suites, meets young adults aged 18 to 25 at the very first point of justice contact, and provides relationship-based mentoring, emotional support, pathways into education and employment, at the door, before a conviction.

For young people exploited through County Lines – victims of trafficking and coercive control, routinely charged rather than safeguarded – genuine diversion means the kind of trusted, community-embedded relationships through which they can be reached before formal contact occurs.

And for girls specifically, the Bloom Hub run by Advance in East London offers what the statutory system almost never can: a woman-only, trauma-informed space for young women and girls aged 13 to 25, built on genuine trusted relationships with specialist practitioners, centred entirely on the young person's voice and agency.

What all three have in common is not a programme model. It is a trusted relationship, offered early, without coercion, connected to practical opportunity. These are not things the statutory system delivers well. They are things that our sector deliver well. And it is time the system was built around that reality.

Because diversion is a response to a failing system, urgently necessary, but not sufficient. What we ultimately need is a system designed from the outset to prevent the need for diversion: prevention, community investment, schools that do not exclude, housing that is stable, families that are supported. A whole-system approach, properly resourced.

Young Adult Justice Transformed

That is why, over the past nine months, the Young Adult Justice Transformed project has brought together 20 years of T2A evidence synthesis, international literature reviews, neuroscience, lived experience, economics, and the collective intelligence of practitioners, academics, economists, policymakers, and young adults through a three-day blueprint hackathon, to begin articulating a clear, evidence-led vision for what a reimagined system could actually look like. Not a wish list. A blueprint.

One grounded in core principles: that responses are age-appropriate and maturity-informed across the full zero to 25 age range, not just legally compliant at the point a birthday is reached; that diversion is the default, not the exception; that structural inequalities of race, gender, care experience, and poverty are actively addressed rather than processed; and that the system is built to withstand political change, not bend to it.

And we are not just articulating values. We are calling for concrete legislative and structural change: primary legislation to establish young adults aged 18 to 25 as a distinct statutory cohort with an Emerging Adult Transition Status; a National Young Adult Care, Education and Employability Fund jointly governed across justice, education, health, and employment; a Statutory Young Adult Commissioner with real powers of intervention; and Regional Community-Led Oversight Hubs, with lived experience at their heart, holding the system genuinely to account. We do not yet have a shared North Star for children and young adult justice in this country, one that holds both together, recognises their interconnection, and demands distinct, developmentally appropriate responses for each. We are building one. And that work belongs to everyone in this room, not just to those in policy offices.

Which brings me to the question of who builds that system? And to do that, I need to address something about language.

The term 'third sector' was never meant as a ranking. But that is often how it functions in practice, third in line, third in priority, a gap-filler for when the state or the market fails, expected to absorb complex social problems without the same secure funding, the same institutional status, or the same seat at the decision-making table. Many organisations now rightly prefer 'voluntary and community sector' or 'civil society', because those terms better reflect the independent importance of this work. But I want to go further than a debate about terminology.

The positioning is empirically wrong. Prisons cannot function without voluntary and community organisations. Probation cannot function without them. Courts, victim support, dependency recovery, mental health provision, care leaver services, exploitation response, none of it works without the sector in this room. We are not supplementary to this system. We are structural to it.

The Civil Society Covenant, launched in July 2025, represents a government commitment to reset that relationship, moving explicitly from 'doing to' communities to 'doing with' them, establishing co-design, lived experience participation, and shared accountability as its four core principles. A covenant is only as strong as the willingness of all parties to hold each other to it. And that means us being clear about what we are asking for, actually what we need and demand, and what we are prepared to do if nothing changes.

Three things. First: co-design as the default, the expertise of this sector belongs at the table from day one, not after the model has been decided.

Second: long-term, relational commissioning, because 12-month output-based contracts are structurally incompatible with the relationships that change lives. Third: lived experience at the centre, not as consultation, but as genuine co-production with a structural role in designing, delivering, and evaluating what replaces the current system.

And fourth: if nothing changes, if the Covenant remains a statement of intent, if co-design remains a consultation exercise, if commissioning cycles continue to make genuine relationship-based practice impossible, then we, as a sector, must be prepared to stop absorbing the consequences of a system that was never designed for justice, refuse to provide cover for its failures, and build the alternative from without. That is not a threat. That is accountability. And it is the most radical thing we could do.

I want to be clear about what I am calling for. Radical, but not reckless. We are not asking for chaos. We are asking for courage. The courage to commission differently. The courage to fund relationships, not just outputs. The courage to say: the evidence is clear and we are going to act on it. And if the system refuses to change, the courage to starve it and invest in what works instead.

It always seems impossible until it is done.

Nelson Mandela

We have the evidence. We have the capability. We have the relationships. What we need is the architecture around our work to finally be worthy of it.

Justice, as I understand it, is freedom from pain and trauma for all. Not just for some. Not just for those the system decides deserve it. For all. And building that kind of justice requires exactly the collaboration, challenge, and reimagining that this session is designed to begin.

Before we open to discussion, one question for everyone in this room. Take two minutes. Talk to the person next to you. The question is this:

We either call ourselves, or allow ourselves to be called, the voluntary sector. But there is nothing voluntary about the crisis these children and young adults are in. So, what does it look like when we stop voluntarily filling the gaps in a system that was never designed for justice and consistently works against the people it claims to serve, and start building the replacement?

Because the blueprint for a reimagined system is not going to be written in a policy office. It is going to be built from the ground up, by the people in rooms like this one, with the evidence, the practice knowledge, and the relationships to make it real.

You are not consultees. You are co-authors of what comes next.

Four questions to take away:

1. What are you personally prepared to do, or refuse to do, to make transformation happen? What is your line in the sand?
2. If you had equal-status commissioning power in your area from tomorrow, what is the one thing you would change this week? And what has stopped you demanding that already?
3. If the system is doing exactly what it was designed to do, what are we, as a sector, still doing that is propping it up? And what would we have to stop doing, or start refusing, to genuinely disrupt it?
4. Radical reform has been recommended, evidenced, and argued for decades. The question is no longer what needs to change. It is: what are you personally willing to be accountable for changing? And what will you tell your organisation when you get back today?