Young adult women prisoners' understandings of safety and 'good' staff-prisoner relationships

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Contents

Summary

The research summarised in this report describes the findings of a study of young adult prisoners in a women's prison.[1] The research examined prisoners' understandings of (un)safety in prison, as well as their reported experiences of staff-prisoner relationships, through an intersectional lens of age and gender. The study included 24 qualitative 1:1 interviews, as well as co-produced drama workshops with a group of eight young adults, the latter facilitated by Clean Break Theatre Company. A total of 27 participants aged 19-25 took part in the research. Fieldwork was undertaken in one women's prison, HMP/YOI Styal in the North of England, during a three-month period in August - October 2024. Due to the sample size and the focus on just one prison the findings may not be generalisable to all young adults held in women's prisons in England.

[1] Two transgender men, one non-binary young adult and 24 women held in the prison took part in the study.

Background

The population of young adult women in prison

A snapshot census of prisoners in England and Wales on 30th September 2024 indicated that 290 young adult women aged 18-24 were in prison, of whom 83 were aged 18-20 and 207 were 21-24 years old. Young adult women aged 18-24 comprised 8.2% of the total adult female prison population and just 0.33% of the overall population of imprisoned adults.[2] Precise figures relating to sentencing or to the custodial population of young adults that include 25-year-olds are not published. It should also be noted that 18-year-old prisoners generally remain in the youth custodial estate until they turn 19 due to overcrowding pressures in adult establishments.

The number of young adults aged 18-24 appearing in court in England and Wales has decreased very substantially during the past two decades, falling by 76% overall between 2007-8 and 2018-19, and by 81% amongst young adult women during this 11-year period (Hughes & Hartman, 2022). Recent analysis of trends between 2010 and 2024 reveals that, despite the number of young adult women both appearing in court and being sentenced to immediate custody decreasing sharply, the latter by 77% during the 14-year period analysed, the length of the average custodial sentence imposed on young adult women increased by two-thirds, from 10.4 to 17.3 months (Tuv, 2025: 10). The average sentence length for young Black women increased from 17.2 months in 2010 to 22.3 months in 2024, although the author notes that these data may not be reliable as numbers are small and thus vulnerable to being skewed by outliers (Tuv, 2025: 15).

The proportion of remanded prisoners in England and Wales has increased significantly in recent years, exacerbated by court backlogs. One-fifth of all prisoners are now on remand,[3] with rates of remand highest amongst young adult and women prisoners. In December 2024, 26% of women in prison were remanded, and women on remand account for almost half of adult female prison receptions (Prison Reform Trust, 2025). Rates are higher still amongst younger women: on 30th September 2024, 51% of 18–20-year-olds and 35% of 21-24-year-olds in the women's estate were on remand, either

[2] 3,524 women and a total of 86,966 individuals were imprisoned on 30th September 2024 (see https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024 - Prison population: 30 September 2024).

[3] See https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sentencing-bill-2025/sentencing-bill-remand-measures-factsheet

unconvicted or awaiting sentence.[4] Similarly, around half of girls in youth custody are remanded (Hancock, 2025). The majority of women remanded to custody are subsequently acquitted or receive a community outcome: in 2023, just 32% of women remanded by the Magistrates' courts, and 54% of those remanded by the Crown courts, went on to receive a custodial sentence (Prison Reform Trust, 2025). Younger women are also more likely than younger men to be remanded in custody at Crown court for offences for which they do not subsequently receive a custodial sentence: 56% of remanded young adult women aged 18-24 who received a custodial remand in the Crown court between 2012 and 2024 were subsequently sentenced to immediate custody, compared with 75% of young adult men (Tuv, 2025: 9).

Moving beyond snapshot data and focusing on the youngest adult prisoners, during the year ending 30 June 2024, 85 women aged 18-20 were admitted to custody under sentence; of these, 40 (47%) were sentenced to six months or less.[5] A much larger number of 186 young adults aged 18-20 was admitted to women's prisons on remand during the same time period, of whom 120 were untried and 66 convicted awaiting sentence.[6] Remand and sentences of six months or less in combination thus constituted 83% of all prison receptions of 18-20 year-old women – the vast majority. In addition, 54 women aged 18-20 were recalled to prison during the same year.[7] A lack of suitable accommodation in the community and an absence of alternative placements, including in hospital, have been identified as contributing factors in custodial remands for girls and women (Hancock, 2025; HMIP, 2022; 2025a), suggesting that prison is being used inappropriately as a 'place of safety' when other options are unavailable. Homelessness, domestic abuse and unmet health and substance misuse needs are also key factors in women's recall to prison (Prison Reform Trust, 2018).

(Un)safety in custody

Safety is a fundamental right for prisoners, who are in the care of the state. Women and younger prisoners are most likely to report feeling unsafe in prison and young female prisoners are a uniquely vulnerable group (Hancock, 2025; HMIP, 2022; 2025a). Both prior to, and following, imprisonment, their lives on the outside are frequently characterised by trauma and an absence of safety. Research examining the

[4] 42 out of 83 18-20-year-olds and 72 out of 207 21-24-year-olds (see Prison population: 30 September 2024 (Table 1.Q.6)).
[5] See Prison receptions: April to June 2024, Table 2.Q.8.
[6] See Prison receptions: April to June 2024, Table 2.Q.6.
[7] See Prison receptions: April to June 2024, Table 2.Q.10. Data relating to the 21-24-year-old age group is not reported. All adults aged 21 and above are aggregated within the published prison admissions data, hence this older group of young adults cannot be discussed separately here.

backgrounds of imprisoned young women documents extremely high levels of sexual abuse, violence and exploitation, neglect, poverty and care experience, as well as mental ill health, substance misuse and homelessness (e.g. Crewe *et al.*, 2017; Douglas & Plugge, 2006; Fitzpatrick *et al.*, 2023; HMIP, 2022). Imprisoned and criminalised women are also subject to intense cultural stigma on account of their gender (Sharpe, 2024), which may be internalised, leading to feelings of shame, guilt and even self-hatred (Chamberlen, 2016; Rutter & Barr, 2021), with implications for self-harm.

Self-harm

Self-harm amongst prisoners in England and Wales is at its highest rate since time series records began.[8] Self-harm rates in women's prisons rose from 2,212 per 1,000 prisoners in 2004 to 6,056 per 1,000 in 2024, and self-harm is more than 8.5 times higher in prisons for women than those for men (HMIP, 2025a). Recorded self-injury rates amongst women have risen particularly sharply in the recent past: in the 12 months to March 2023, for example, there was a 52% increase in self-harm incidents in the women's estate, with the average number of incidents per self-harming woman rising from 11.1 to 17.[9] Subsequent rates have continued to increase.

Younger women are at elevated risk. In the 12 months to December 2024 the recorded rate of self-harm amongst 18-20 year-old women was an extraordinary 50,261 incidents per 1,000 prisoners, compared with 1,938 per 1,000 male prisoners of the same age.[10] Young women aged 18-24 account for more than one-third (35%) of recorded self-harm incidents in the women's estate, and 18-20 year-old women, despite comprising just two per cent of imprisoned women, account for 17% of women prisoners' self-harm incidents, self-harming 45.8 times each, on average, per year in 2024.[11] As with self-

[8] See chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6889fe34e1a850d72c4091f9/safety-in-custody-q1-2025.pdf

[9] See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-march-2023/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-june-2023-assaults-and-self-harm-to-march-2023

[10] See https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/safety-in-custody-quarterly-update-to-december-2024/safety-in-custody-statistics-england-and-wales-deaths-in-prison-custody-to-march-2025-assaults-and-self-harm-to-december-2024#:~:text=from%200.1%25).-,Age,per%201%2C000%20prisoners)%20age%20groups

[11] See analysis conducted by Agenda Alliance: https://www.agendaalliance.org/news/agenda-alliance-responds-to-over-20000-incidents-of-self-harm-in-the-womens-estate-in-just-one-year/

harm, the incidence of prison suicide decreases with age amongst women, compared with male prisoners amongst whom risk increases with age (Walker & Towl, 2016).

In addition to gender and age, risk of self-harm is influenced by whether a prisoner is on remand, sentenced or subject to recall: rates of self-harm are higher amongst remanded women prisoners than sentenced ones (Prison Reform Trust, 2022[12]) and, within the sentenced population, self-harm is substantially elevated amongst recalled prisoners.[13] The very high incidence of remand among young adult women intersects with age- and gender-related risks to increase the likelihood of self-harm amongst this group of prisoners exponentially.

His Majety's Inspectorate of Prisons' recent thematic review of what helps women cope in prison, *Time to Care* (HMIP, 2025a), highlighted a range of institutional factors that are likely to increase women prisoners' risk of self-harm, including limited regimes, isolation, lack of contact with children and officer training and inexperience. Miller *et al*. (2021) have suggested that relational security, namely an understanding and empathic person or people, is one of the best means of reducing self-harm in teenage girls. This is likely to apply equally to young adult women. However, in practice, officers have been found to resort to punitive and restrictive measures – including use of force and anti-rip clothing – in response to women in crisis, and to make insufficient effort to de-escalate crisis situations (HMIP, 2022; 2025a).

Use of force

The restraint of girls in youth custody came to national attention in March 2024 upon the publication of an unannounced inspection of HMYOI Wetherby (HMIP, 2024). The inspection report described two incidents in which male staff cut off the clothing, under restraint, of a vulnerable girl, in order to prevent her from making ligatures. HMIP's earlier thematic review of girls in custody noted that the very small number of imprisoned girls were restrained much more frequently than boys, often in response to self-harm, resulting in a repetitious cycle of self-harm and restraint which was traumatising for girls and failed to address the underlying causes of their self-harming behaviour (HMIP, 2022).

[12] See https://prisonreformtrust.org.uk/women-on-remand-more-likely-to-self-harm/

[13] See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/680a1fba6d6ac02ee99d844e/safety-in-custody-q4-2024.pdf (p.12)

A recent analysis by HMPPS of the use of force in prisons found that women prisoners experience the highest rates of planned force: 127 incidents per 1,000 prisoners compared with a national average of 77 per 1,000. Black and mixed ethnicity women were found to experience planned force, as well as force due to assaults or fighting, more frequently than white women, while white women more commonly experienced force following self-harm (Bosworth *et al*., 2025[14]). Women experiencing force following incidents of self-harm are on average younger than those experiencing force for other reasons: twice the proportion of young adult women aged 18-25, compared with older women, experience force following self-harm (*ibid*.). The same analysis also revealed that women prisoners are much more likely than men to experience use of force due to non-compliance. Gendered expectations and age-related stereotypes, as well as the interaction styles and skills of prison officers, may influence both prisoners' behaviour and staff judgements about what constitutes non-compliance. Moreover, individual factors including mental ill health, neurodivergence, drug withdrawal or a history of trauma may influence compliance in age- and gender-specific ways. Insights from neuroscientific research indicate that consequential thinking, amongst other cognitive capacities, is not fully developed until at least the mid-twenties (Blakemore & Choudry, 2006), which has implications both for managing emotions and complying with rules. Also relevant is a significantly higher rate of recorded assaults on both staff and other prisoners in women's establishments than in men's, a pattern that has been in evidence since December 2019, with assaults on staff having increased substantially in the women's estate since December 2020.[15] Importantly, data on the nature and context of assaults in prison are not published.

[14] See https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/68093394e4d2b76ccfb527a0/Use_of_Force_Evaluation_Report.pdf

[15] See chrome-extension://efaidnbmnnnibpcajpcglclefindmkaj/https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/680a1fba6d6ac02ee99d844e/safety-in-custody-q4-2024.pdf (pp.15-20)

The Young Adult Hub at HMP/YOI Styal

Background to Styal's specialist young adult provision

In contrast to the men's custodial estate, which has a specific operating model, Young Offender Institutions (YOIs), for young adult men under the age of 21, there has been no dedicated provision for young adult women in custody in England and Wales. This group has also been largely invisible in a growing body of research focusing on the specific needs and experiences of young adults in conflict with the law and the need for specialised criminal justice provision for this group, most of which has focused on young men.

The origins of the young adult provision at HMP/YOI Styal are in the *Prisons Strategy White Paper*, published by the Conservative Government in December 2021 (Ministry of Justice, 2021).[16] The White Paper promised 'a new approach to women's prisons' (Chapter Four), that would be trauma-informed and trauma-responsive, as well as the development and implementation of mandatory training for specially selected staff in women's prisons. The White Paper further committed, in its 10-year vision for women's prisons, to provide 'tailored, age-appropriate care and services to young women in custody' (Ministry of Justice, 2021: 58), acknowledging that this group is disproportionately likely to have experienced trauma, homelessness and early parenthood, and to be care experienced. The White Paper also highlighted that young adult women are more likely to self-harm than any other group of prisoners, and that they are over-represented in assaults and antisocial behaviour incidents. Finally, an aim to produce a Young Women's Strategy was stated, although this is yet to happen.

Subsequently, the somewhat delayed *Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022 to 2025*, which was published in January 2023, five years after the *Female Offender Strategy* (Ministry of Justice, 2018), committed to testing a bespoke approach to managing young women and providing enhanced levels of support to this group in two prisons. HMP/YOI Styal was one of these,[17] and the Young Adult (YA) Hub was the chosen delivery model. The *Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan 2022-2025* reiterated a commitment to develop and publish a Young Women's (18-25) Strategy spanning the whole of the criminal justice system, to include best practice guidance to

[16] It is important to note that the various Government strategies and plans referred to in this section were published under four different Governments: three Conservative (led by Theresa May, Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak) and one Labour (led by Keir Starmer).

[17] The other was the private prison HMP/YOI Bronzefield, run by Sodexo.

support young women in custody (Ministry of Justice, 2023: 21). Subsequently, the *Female Offender Strategy Delivery Plan: 'One year on' progress report*, published in May 2024, highlighted the particular challenges faced by young adult women in custody and referred, albeit very briefly, to the two service delivery pilots (Ministry of Justice, 2024). In September 2024, while the fieldwork described in this report was taking place, the newly elected Labour Government created a new body, the Women's Justice Board, which become operational in January 2025.

Operationalisation of the Young Adult Hub

His Majesty's Prison and Probation Service's Women's Group oversaw the development of the Young Adult (YA) Hub at Styal, which became fully operational in March 2024. The YA Hub was designed as inclusive, catering for all young adults aged 18-25 in the prison at any stage of remand or sentence and regardless of their offending history or length of stay. The main aim of the provision was to reduce distress and improve young adults' safety, evidenced by reductions in self-harm and suicides, as well as a decrease in violence towards others, reduced use of force and adjudications, and a reduction in the use of the care and separation (segregation) unit. Broader context highlighted by HMPPS Women's Group included high levels of care experience, limited life experience, psychosocial immaturity, and the fact that young women with neurodevelopmental conditions are less likely than young men to receive a (timely) diagnosis. HMPPS Women's Group also drew attention to the frequency of recent exposure to childhood adversity, trauma and abuse, substance misuse as a self-medication strategy, poor attachments to adults and limited positive role models, as well as a 'cliff edge' of support in the transition from youth custody. Finally, young adult women prisoners' need to alleviate boredom and to interact with same-age peers were highlighted.

The YA Hub, located in a former houseblock[18] in Styal, had not been substantially modified from its former use. On the ground floor of the building was a large group room, staff offices, a kitchen and a pool room, as well as a large hallway where much time was spent milling around and chatting. On the first floor were meeting rooms, small group/craft rooms and a sensory room with mood lighting and large bean bags. The original houseblock's wash basins and bathrooms remained in situ. The YA Hub's large group room, which had the look and feel of a youth club, was relaxed and young person-friendly. It contained sofas, chairs and tables, bean bags and tea and coffee

[18] Prisoner accommodation at HMP/YOI Styal is split between 17 large houses (formerly a Victorian orphanage), each accommodating around 20 prisoners, and one wing.

making equipment, and the walls were decorated with artwork and writing created by the young adult prisoners. There was often loud music playing.

The YA Hub was staffed by three dedicated prison officers, including one senior officer, as well as a senior forensic psychologist who was co-located in the Hub building. The YA Hub opened each weekday for morning and afternoon sessions (prisoners had to return to their houseblock or wing accommodation for two hours over lunch) as well as some evening and weekend sessions. Young adults could also have 1:1 meetings with other prison staff in the Hub building.

Kinetic Youth, a national youth work charity, was contracted to provide regular groupwork activities alongside prison staff. There were some staffing issues during the research period, which meant that the YA Hub was not always open as planned. However, at the time of writing, the Hub is open five days a week (Monday to Thursday and Saturday) in the morning and afternoon, with additional evening sessions on Mondays and Wednesdays. Most group sessions continue to be run by Kinetic Youth, with prison officers running these in the event of Kinetic staff absences. Due to limits on group numbers as well as interpersonal dynamics, staff operated a rota for attendance at the Hub, prioritising young adults who were not in work or attending education and who would otherwise remain locked in their house or on the wing for prolonged periods.

HMPPS Women's Group have sought to understand the impact of the Young Adult Hub at Styal from the point of view of the young adults using it. The research documented in the remainder this report provides evidence about young adult prisoners' experiences and perceptions of feeling (un)safe in a women's prison, as well as their relationships with prison staff. It also presents their views about the YA Hub provision at Styal.

The Study

Research Questions

The study's primary research questions were twofold:

1. How do young adult women prisoners understand (un)safety and (in)security in prison? What people, things, locations and interactions do young adults perceive and experience as more or less safe in prison?
2. How do young adults in a women's prison experience relationships with prison staff? What do 'good' prisoner-staff relationships look like from their perspective? What practices and interactions do they identify as more or less positive and supportive?

Research Methods

The research consisted of two strands of activity. First, in-depth 1:1 qualitative semi-structured interviews were undertaken by Dr Gilly Sharpe with 24 young adult prisoners between August and October 2024. The interviews focused on participants' understandings and experiences of (un)safety in prison and their relationships with prison staff. They were also asked about their views and experiences of school, as well as (any) prior experiences of other secure institutions. Analysis of the latter two topics is not presented in this report. The second activity involved co-produced drama workshops with a group of eight young adults in the prison, facilitated by Clean Break Theatre Company. The drama workshops, which took place over a three-week period in September 2024, explored young adults' perceptions of safety in prison and relationships with prison staff. While insights from the drama activity are incorporated in remainder of this report, due to the nature of the process there were no discrete findings that could be analysed in detail. However, the issues raised and discussed in the workshops both mirrored and shed further light on the findings that emerged from the 1:1 interviews.

The research was granted ethical approval by the School of Law's Research Ethics Committee at the University of Sheffield. It was also approved by the National Research Committee within HMPPS. Participant recruitment was co-ordinated by the Young Adults Clinical Lead (a senior forensic psychologist) and the Senior Prison Officer working within the YA Hub. Involvement in the research and the drama workshops was voluntary. All young adults within the target age range (18-25) were eligible, although participants deemed to be especially vulnerable or unable to give informed consent

were not included. Any such individuals were screened by the Young Adults Clinical Lead. The research was advertised via posters displayed on the walls of the YA Hub and via participant information sheets distributed to prisoners. The researcher also produced two short videos – the first introducing herself and the research, and the second a video version of the participant information sheet – which were shared with all the young adults in the prison via their laptops.

All participants were aged between 19 and 25 years. The interviews, which took place in a private room in the YA Hub building, had a mean duration of 69 minutes, ranging from 22 minutes to almost 2.5 hours. The interviews and the drama workshops covered topics that have the potential to cause distress, including (vicarious) experience of self-harm, restraint and assault in prison. Participants were forewarned of the sensitive nature of the interview themes in the participant information sheet and the introductory video. This was reiterated verbally at the start of each interview, when participants were also informed that they did not have to answer questions if they did not wish to and that they could freely choose to withdraw from the research until a specified date. Interview participants were asked to sign a consent form, which was explained to them verbally at the start of each interview. Anonymity and confidentiality were assured, with caveats relating to breaching prison security rules, the disclosure of intended harm to self or others and the disclosure of unreported offences. Breaks were incorporated into interviews as needed due the emotionally taxing nature of the subject matter and since some participants struggled to maintain focus for long periods. Each interviewee was given a sheet with details of support agencies within and outside the prison. The staff working in the YA Hub, who were aware of the interview topics and usually fairly well-acquainted with individual young adults, offered post-interview support and decompression time where required.

Interview data were anonymised and pseudonymised and all interviews were audio-recorded and professionally transcribed, with participants' consent. The data generated were coded and analysed thematically using NVivo qualitative data analysis software.

The drama-based groupwork took place in the large group room in the YA Hub, and a ‘sharing’ (informal performance) took place at the end of the groupwork programme in a meeting room elsewhere in the prison. This was planned, and agreed with prison managers, to be delivered to an audience of prison officers. However, in the event the prison was not able to organise this, so the ‘sharing’ took place in front of a small audience of prison managers at the end of a scheduled meeting. The researcher and

the two Clean Break facilitators did not carry keys, so were escorted to and from the gate on each visit. While keys would have facilitated speedier access to the YA Hub, it was deemed important to be seen as independent. Several of the young women commented positively on the fact that neither the researcher nor the Clean Break staff carried keys.

A total of 27 young adults were involved in the study. Published data indicate that eight young adults aged 18-20, and 24 individuals aged 21-24, were held in Styal on 30th September 2024.[19] There are no disaggregated date on numbers of 25-year-old prisoners. Due to levels of remand and short sentences population numbers fluctuate considerably. For the purposes of targeted young adult provision in the prison, as well as for inclusion in this research, young adults were defined as aged 18-25. However, as indicated earlier, 18-year-old prisoners are currently held in the youth estate. Although it is unwise to generalise from the findings presented here to all young adults in women's prisons, the sample size of 27 is nonetheless substantial, and significant in light of the absence of prior empirical research focusing specifically on this group.

Description of the sample

The interview sample included 24 young adults aged 19-25, half (12) of whom were 24 or 25. Twenty-one individuals identified as female, two as male, and one as non-binary/gender fluid. The majority (20/24) were white British, one was black British, and three were of mixed ethnicity. The very small proportion of racially minoritised participants is in line with the prison's wider population. All except one were British nationals. According to the prison 14 interview participants (58%) had a formal diagnosis or suspected traits of neurodivergence. Eleven interviewees (46%) were care experienced and five reported being mothers. Eleven individuals (46%) had been homeless immediately prior to entering prison and several others had been insecurely housed. Due to small numbers as well as substantial overlap with the interview participants, demographic information relating to the drama workshop participants is not reported.

There is no categorisation in the women's prison estate; consequently, remanded and sentenced prisoners, including those sentenced to life imprisonment, are held together in HMP/YOI Styal. Thirteen interviewees (54%) were remanded and eleven were

[19] Calculated using prison population data tool, 30th September 2024, accessed via https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/offender-management-statistics-quarterly-april-to-june-2024.

sentenced, including three who had been recalled. Two individuals (8%) were serving very long sentences. Fifteen interview participants (63%) were in prison for the first time, six (25%) for the second time, and three (13%) had been imprisoned multiple (up to eight) times. Eighteen individuals (75%) had spent less than six months in prison on this occasion, twelve (50%) less than three months, and five (21%) more than a year. Just one had been transferred from youth custody several years earlier. Consistent with the very high proportion of remanded and recalled young adults in women's establishments, discussed above, there was very considerable 'churn' amongst this group. Fieldwork also coincided with the first two release dates under the SDS40 early release scheme.[20] During the three-month fieldwork period, at least one of the research participants had been remanded *and* sentenced *and* released *and* recalled. This extremely high incidence of flux, instability and very short spells in prison is very significant for understanding the custodial experiences of young adult women and the provision of age-and-gender-specific support and services for young adults in women's prisons. It also raises questions about the appropriateness of custody for this group.

[20] The SDS40 early release scheme allowed certain prisoners to be released after serving 40% of their sentence, as opposed to the usual halfway point. It appeared that several young adults who were released early on SDS40 had received no advance warning. Some were known to be homeless, raising questions about the level of support they would receive in the community and the possibly elevated risk of recall.

Findings

(Un)safety in prison

When considering young adult women prisoners' understandings of safety in prison, their frequent backgrounds of trauma, disruption, harm, exclusion and rejection, poor attachment, care experience and instability outside prison must always be borne in mind. These backgrounds, combined with the elevated pain and stigma associated with women's imprisonment, means that for many, safety in custody may be illusory. In addition to interpersonal and structural adversities, there is uncertainty regarding length of stay for the very high proportion of young adult women who are on remand. Court backlogs, exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, can extend periods spent on remand. Two of the research participants explicitly stated that they had been remanded in custody because they were street homeless and had no support on the outside.

A small number of interviewees explained that they felt safer in prison than on the outside. This viewpoint needs to be understood in the context of frequent experience of trauma and adversity, as well as circumstances including family, domestic and sexual violence, drug addiction and debt, involvement in sex work, mental ill health and psychiatric diagnoses. It was clear throughout the research that situations and experiences both inside and outside prison that most would consider extremely unsafe were seen as 'normal', or 'just life', by some young adults.

Their young age and, for the majority of interviewees, no previous experience of imprisonment, added to the initial shock of being imprisoned. Many participants recounted feeling scared, unprepared and fearful for their personal safety. One young woman described her first arrival at the prison as

> [s]cary. Like, everyone…you look at everyone and everyone's using drugs. Like, it is *really* scary. Everyone's older. No-one's really your age.

Some were withdrawing from drugs, and many had no clothes or personal items with them when they arrived from court. Their inexperience, immaturity and unpreparedness renders young adults particularly vulnerable to manipulation, bullying and theft by older, more seasoned prisoners who may 'befriend' and offer help to naïve newcomers, 'lending' them items to try to entrap them into debt. For some participants, a delay of

several days before they received a formal induction, and being 'fobbed off' when going to the office to ask for anything, resulted in confusion and distress.

While some participants described feeling safer in prison, for most the converse was true. Feeling unsafe in custody commonly related to a lack of confidence in the nature and speed of officers' responses to psychological distress and mental health crises. The spectre of three recent suicides in the prison – two in December 2023 and one in July 2024, shortly before this research took place – permeated interviewees' discussions about (un)safety.[21] Participants who had been in the prison for longer were aware of deaths that had occurred because, as they saw it, officers had not responded sufficiently quickly, a situation which one young woman described as 'genuinely scary'. Another young adult remarked that

> a lot of us people that suffer with ligatures are kind of like, well, they're not going to find us in time, are they? If they can't find her [*suicide victim*], then they won't find us.

Ambulances were frequently visible in the prison grounds and the emergency 'code blue' alert system audible on officers' radios at regular intervals, contributing to a continuous backdrop of vicarious trauma, anxiety and high arousal. As one long-sentenced young adult explained:

> I must hear, you know, like on the radio three or four times a day I genuinely hear, "Hotel 2, Hotel 2, can you respond to an act of self-harm by cutting/strangulation/ligature/head banging?"

Less dramatically, depression and low mood may be worsened by routine deprivations, including having no money, no 'phone credit to be able to talk to relatives, including children, not having one's own clothes, delays in receiving prescribed medication, boredom and the isolation of being alone in a cell, 'in your own head', and not being involved in education, work or structured activities. Keeping busy and having people to

[21] A further suicide, of 25-year-old young Alex Davies, occurred shortly after this research was completed, on Christmas Eve, 2024. The jury at the inquest reached a narrative conclusion which included the finding that the young woman was not placed on constant observation after ligaturing in the care and separation (segregation) unit and that this failure of care probably caused her death (see https://www.inquest.org.uk/alex-davies-inquest-concludes).

talk to were frequently highlighted as key means of increasing safety. However, waiting lists for jobs and understaffing – which usually meant more hours locked up – were felt to compromise activities that would decrease boredom and also provide a small income. Understaffing is well-known to reduce the time prisoners spend out of their cells and engaged in work, education and other activities, which in turn can negatively affect mental health and self-harm (HMIP, 2025a). Participants also often mentioned having no-one and nothing on the outside as a risk factor for self-harm, as well as feeling shame at one's offending.

During the drama groupwork sessions and the interviews young adults identified areas of the prison that made them feel more or less safe. Safer spaces included the YA Hub, chapel, gym and library, and less safe ones were the segregation (care and separation) unit, the Valentina unit (used for respite and time out from the main prison), the medication queue and 'X side' of Waite wing, the latter being most commonly mentioned. X side accommodates prisoners who require single cell accommodation and is where some of the most complex prisoners are accommodated. Houses were felt to be more or less safe depending on 'whether you fit in'. In relation to the YA Hub, both the general feel of the building and, in particular, the dedicated YA Hub staff, contributed to the near-universal view that it was a safe and welcoming space. Observation of informal gatherings and conversations in the YA Hub and outside the entrance to the building attested to the high quality of interactions between young adult prisoners and Hub staff.

Self-harm

It is difficult to overstate how traumatising life in a women's prison can be. This includes the vicarious trauma that living surrounded by self-harm entails. The extreme abnormality of the environment is remarkable. One young adult commented that prisoners witness things on a very regular basis that most people on the outside would not see in their lifetime. Constant exposure to fresh scars, plasters and bandages, seeing and hearing other prisoners in distress – self-harming, shouting, banging and crying – and the noise of staff responses and radio communication, undermined *all* participants' sense of safety and led to widespread sleep deprivation and physical and emotional exhaustion. In a particularly shocking example of vicarious trauma, a small number of interviewees recounted that they had directly observed the body of the prison's (then) most recent suicide victim being removed from Waite wing under a white sheet.

Young adult women prisoners, like almost two-thirds of the research participants, are frequently in prison for the first time and, as already discussed, disproportionately likely to be dealing with the uncertainty of remand. Very high levels of remand and short sentences amongst this group means that time spent in induction and the early days of imprisonment makes up a disproportionate amount of their collective prison experience. Younger women in distress, and notably neurodivergent individuals, who comprised 58% of the participants in this study, may find it particularly difficult to cope. The early days of imprisonment are a particularly anxious time, when risk of self-harm is elevated. Detoxing from drugs, the shock of imprisonment and separation from children[22] were all discussed as significant in terms of (not) coping psychologically in the early days of prison life.

Boredom was felt by many to be a factor in psychological distress, ranging from low mood to self-harm. Long periods of time sent in a cell, alone – which was made worse by staff shortages – were believed to contribute to rumination and distress. Restlessness and a need for stimulation associated with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) is likely to further increase the pain of solitary confinement, potentially elevating the risk of self-harm among neurodivergent young prisoners (Young *et al*., 2023). Participants frequently believed, consistent with numerous inspection and inquest reports, that many women in prison are severely mentally ill and should be in hospital, with one participant stating that the prison is like a 'poorly funded mental health hospital.' The latest inspection of HMP/YOI Styal, which took place in December 2024 (HMIP, 2025b), highlighted the acute vulnerabilities of the prison's population in relation to mental health need. The report further noted that recorded self-harm had almost doubled since the previous inspection in 2021. Several interviewees believed that previously non-self-harming prisoners may occasionally copy others who self-harm. Others expressed concern that prisoners living in houses were allowed to purchase multi-packs of razors from the prison canteen.

It was clear from participants' accounts that very high levels of distress, mental illness, constant self-harm and 'incidents' in the prison were normalised which, many believed, resulted in desensitisation amongst prison officers and uncompassionate treatment. As one participant explained:

[22] In contrast with older prisoners, however, fewer young adults (and just five women in this study) have dependent children from whom they are separated, although those who do are likely to have very young children.

> There's no like kind of emotive involvement, I'd say, and that kind of makes it like weirder because it's just so normalised that it is, you know, "Oh, can you please attend Y2 02 for an act of self-harm, please?" It's like [*sighs*], you know, *another one*! [...] I mean, even when that comes over the radio the code blue, it's like, it's just calm.

Call bells were a particular subject of concern. Houseblocks in Styal have two call bells, one for emergencies and one for non-emergencies. Many participants stated that it can take 20-25 minutes for officers to respond to a call bell. The physical layout of the prison was also felt to contribute to delays. Having no staff on house blocks outside roll checks and periods of movement around the prison made it impossible for prisoners to follow up on requests or to remind officers about things they had promised to do. Young adults also reported that staff frequently told prisoners that they were 'too busy' to talk to them when they needed help, or that they responded to call bells briefly, promising to return later but failing to do so. Once again, this must be understood in the context of prison understaffing and overcrowding. Officers responding to crises also reduces staff available to respond to other prisoners, as well as increasing the time prisoners spend locked in cells and houseblocks.

Numerous interviewees (importantly, this did *not* include any young adults who reported that they self-harmed) believed that self-harming can be a means of gaining attention or getting things done where requests for help have elicited no response. It was frequently stated that some prison officers believe self-harmers are seeking attention or behaving badly, and not 'serious'. Notably all of the self-harming participants, and numerous others, saw self-harm as a coping mechanism which is more likely to be used when there is no-one to talk to. Self-harm could also function as a release when means of 'coping' or surviving usually used on the outside (e.g. self-medicating with alcohol or drugs) were no longer accessible.

Disciplinary responses to using call bells, including in the context of self-harm, were mentioned frequently. One young adult described her experience:

> I've got put on basic before because I put the bell on three times and I got an IEP,[23] because one of the times I'd cut up and then I realised what I'd done. [*She*

[23] The Incentives and Earned Privileges (IEP) Scheme aims to incentivise prisoners to abide by the prison's rules and remove privileges from those who behave poorly or refuse to engage. Positive consequences

> *said*] "I need to talk to the officer about it, over what I've done." And then they said, "Well, that's not an emergency – IEP!" [...] And then I don't like putting the bell on for things like that anymore.

This same young adult had been imprisoned numerous times, including most recently for self-harming in a hospital setting which, she explained, had been alleged to constitute intentional (criminal) damage to NHS property. She gave the following account of prison guard responses to her making ligatures:

> And I've been told a couple of times, when I've had a ligature around my neck, that's made me feel unsafe, is, "Oh, stop doing it for attention. People actually die from this!" And you're sitting there thinking, do I look like I'm wrapping something around my neck for attention? Would you call someone that on the outside?

Although few interviewees discussed being restrained in the context of self-injury, restraint was believed by a small number of self-harming young adults to worsen distress and increase the likelihood of further self-harm. Flashbacks to past traumatic experiences of shouting and violent victimisation by male partners or family members were mentioned. One individual stated that the threat and fear of being 'moved to the seg'[24] triggered (a desire to) self-harm. Another participant explained:

> And it's like, a few years ago I got a nicking [...]. I got to go to the seg to get, by the Governor, because I ligatured and I pushed an officer away and tried to tie it tight around my neck. And the officers, they tried to pin me on the floor like I'd done something wrong and I needed to be basically twisted up, because I'd done something wrong, and restrained.

Several women subject to 'ACCTs'[25] stated that they were observed regularly in their cells but that this was sometimes a case of prison staff opening their door flap without speaking. 'Good' officers, by contrast, asked if they were alright, and checked again – for example by asking, 'Are you sure?' – and told them to ring the bell if they needed

(privileges) include in-cell televisions, an increased number of visits, increased access to the gym and a larger cash allowance.

[24] Segregation, or Care and Separation Unit

[25] Assessment, Care in Custody and Teamwork (ACCT) is a care planning process used in prisons to support people identified as being at risk of self-harm or suicide. The ACCT process requires that certain actions are taken to reduce risk.

them. Several participants indicated that, if they were not familiar with individual officers, they had to second-guess which type of response they were likely to receive.

Drugs

Drug use in prison is a major issue that has been highlighted by His Majesty's Inspectorate of Prisons (2025) as destabilising for prisoners. The latest inspection of HMP/YOI Styal (HMIP, 2025b) reported that positive mandatory drug testing rates – which rose to 41% in one month of the summer of 2024, when this research was conducted – were the highest in the women's estate. The majority of the participants in this study referred to the ready availability of drugs in the prison, which were said to be 'absolutely everywhere'. Drug use and possession were believed to undermine safety.

The revolving door of imprisonment for women, involving short but repeated periods in custody, affords more opportunities for drugs to enter women's establishments. Inadequate search procedures, particularly during visits and induction, were believed to facilitate the entry of drugs, and several individuals stated that they had not been searched when they first entered the prison. Drugs were reported to be easiest to obtain on Waite wing, where young newly arrived prisoners are often fearful, susceptible to peer pressure, sometimes withdrawing from substances and vulnerable due to delays, sometimes lengthy ones, in obtaining prescription medication. The strength of prison drugs, usually spice, as well as increased drug use after the arrival of a fresh supply to the prison, followed by detox when it had run out, was believed to lead to increased violence, debt and bullying, a relationship that was also noted by the Independent Monitoring Board (2024).

One participant commented that young women with 'all right' lives on the outside, who ended up in jail where drug use is rife, were shocked and afraid at the level of drug use they witnessed. In a similar vein to self-harm, several interviewees remarked that some women began using drugs in prison as other coping mechanisms they had previously used on the outside, such as alcohol, were not available. On the other hand, it was noted than prisoners often enter prison while detoxing and that the ubiquity of drugs is particularly difficult for them.

Drug use was widely believed to be tacitly accepted, or not taken sufficiently seriously, by prison staff, which participants felt compromised prisoners' safety. Examples were given of prisoners who were visibly intoxicated during visits or walking around the prison

grounds and this going unchallenged by staff. A major incident took place during fieldwork for this study when young adults participating in the research were involved in drug use, and one almost died. It became clear that other prisoners in their house had – by necessity, due to the house system with no officers present overnight – been the first to respond and sound the alarm, resulting in substantial vicarious trauma.

Use of force

Just six participants discussed having been restrained, although for some of these, restraint was a regular experience. A range of opinions was expressed regarding the legitimacy of the use of force: while most individuals, particularly those who had never been restrained, stressed that restraint is used only as a last resort, several described it as shocking and sometimes 'brutal'. Examples given of brutal use of force included a large number of staff (up to 10) restraining one prisoner, as well as holding prisoners by the neck and putting steel toe capped work boots onto women's heads.

Participants generally discussed use of force in response to non-compliance, usually refusing to go inside one's cell or move between houses. Several young adults had to move houses during the fieldwork period, with little to no notice and, it appeared, usually no explanation why they were being required to move. Moves can be unsettling and echo past experiences of instability, particularly for those with care experience. They may also move prisoners away from established peer support networks, however fragile.

It is important to note that young adult women, many of whom have recent experience of sexual or physical assault by men, are routinely restrained by male prison officers, who are usually much larger and stronger than them. Comparisons were made by some young adults between what was considered acceptable to enforce compliance inside prison compared to outside. One young woman, aged 20 and of slight build, explained:

> They twisted my arm. I had bruises all up my arm. [...]. Obviously they can do force, and they can do locks and all that, but it's just, it's still horrible, because you wouldn't do that to anyone else on the out, so what makes you think you can do it to us? [...] I got my thumb bent back like that, and it was bending, bending, bending. My thumb nearly snapped until I said, "Please, please, get off me, please!" So, it's very like, "You're doing this and you're going to go back in that room, unless we're going to inflict pain and make you go back in."

Another participant described witnessing a young woman being restrained in the shower while naked, after refusing to move to another house:

> She was in the shower [...] she was only 20 years of age, she was really young [...]. So, she's emotional, she does kick off a lot, but I think the officers targeted her because she looked like a boy. [...] she was in the shower and that and he [*male guard*] grabbed her out because she refused to move, they grabbed her out the shower naked and that, twisted her up. There was one like kneeling on her chest, one kneeling on her legs, one had one arm down, one had the other arm down. Like horrible - it was horrible to watch. Really, really like hurt her.

Several participants considered the use of force to be counterproductive, resulting in a loss of trust in, and respect towards, officers. The young woman who witnessed the restraint in the shower, described above, explained that she felt extremely angry and that such incidents damaged *all* prisoners' relationships with officers, whether or not they themselves had been restrained. Others described a vicious cycle of restraint: reduced trust in officers resulted in prisoners being less willing to engage with staff, more likely to react negatively to orders, and thus more likely to be restrained in the future. Neurodivergent young people may interpret and respond to orders and authority figures in different ways from neurotypical people, with painful consequences.

Restraint was further remarked upon in relation to self-harm and suicide attempts. One participant who had spent a long time in the prison described an incident when she observed a transgender male young adult prisoner being led to the 'seg' (care and separation unit) whilst under restraint, after climbing up the fence in the exercise yard and threatening to jump off or hang himself with a jumper he had tied around his neck. She explained:

> I think it was necessary by the officers, but it was quite shocking. Like, they just sort of pulled him down and then piled on top of him, because obviously the threat was there that he was going to attempt to take his life. That was quite shocking.

Fights and bullying

When discussing fights within the prison, all of the young adults expressed the view that fights are usually verbal but occasionally involve physical assault. Fights related to vapes, theft, debt and relationships with other prisoners. The 'silliness' and trivial nature of many arguments in prison was often highlighted: minor issues assumed greater significance in the context of few distractions, little autonomy or personal space and women generally having few personal possessions or 'treats' in prison. One young woman explained that 'it's like the biggest argument will just erupt over like a sock, or a biscuit, or a bobble.' Several interviewees remarked that prisoners were far less physically violent towards one another than they had anticipated, and much less so then in men's prisons. This is particularly noteworthy since published data on recorded prison assaults, described earlier, indicates that assaults on both staff and other prisoners are substantially higher in women's prisons.

The concept of 'double bubble', where one refillable vape capsule ('cap') is lent with the expectation that two will be paid back later, was frequently mentioned in relation to debts between prisoners. Some young adults' trainers, clothes or watches had been taken when they had not repaid loans of vape capsules. Certain prisoners were believed to proactively target new inmates who are inexperienced, younger or who have no income or cash sent in by their families. One young adult explained:

> I think young girls who don't know the system [...]. [O]bviously when you come in you get given a battery for your e-cig and a box of caps, obviously you have to pay that back [...]. So my first day on the wing, it was like flies round shit. They were literally all over me, like, "Oh, can I lend a cap off you? I'll give it you back on Friday. Can I lend it off you?"

When physical fights took place in houses, these were generally resolved in-house, after house occupants discussed and agreed what (not) to tell officers about any injuries. The general consensus was that physical fights – which deliberately took place in areas with no cameras – should be denied and 'grassing' avoided. Fights on the wing could result in all prisoners being locked in their cells, effectively punishing everyone.

All of the participants were of the view that prisoners were not, in general, subject to bullying by other prisoners due to their race or sexual identity. Transgender prisoners, amongst whom were several young adults using the YA Hub, and a number of others within the wider prison, appeared to be widely accepted and included by the research

participants, and the transgender men involved in this study spoke positively about peer and officer support for transgender men. The prison had a trans male officer and this representation was highly valued by trans male prisoners. There is a paucity of research on transgender men in prison. A key finding from the current study was that the young adult cis-women participants were apparently unconcerned about being imprisoned alongside transgender men and supportive of transgender men's rights and their presence in the prison.

Prison accommodation

Accommodation at HMP/YOI Styal comprises 17 large houses, each accommodating around 20 prisoners, and one wing, Waite wing, which houses remanded prisoners, newly arrived prisoners on induction and prisoners deemed unsuitable for house accommodation, including individuals subject to ACCT processes and detoxing prisoners. Rules regarding younger adults sharing cells with older adults also means that some of the youngest prisoners remain on Waite wing. However, the majority of prisoners move from the wing's induction unit to a house. All of the research participants thus had some, if sometimes brief, experience of the wing and the majority had also spent time in one or more houses.

The majority of individuals preferred – and felt safer - living in a house, due to having more space and freedom of movement, and since there were no guards in houses except for roll calls. However, a significant minority favoured Waite wing. These young adults preferred being alone behind a closed door with prison officers in closer proximity. Nonetheless, being on the wing, amongst a high concentration of high-risk prisoners, and spending more time locked up alone with few distractions, was experienced by some as highly stressful. The irony was that, while self-harmers, including those subject to an ACCT, were held on Waite wing, less social time and less peer support than in the houses frequently had a detrimental impact on wing prisoners' mental health. Compared with free-flow movement in the houses, where only the front door was locked, prisoners spent more, and often unpredictable, hours locked in their cells on the wing. It was evident from participants' accounts that life on Waite wing was noisy and tense, and often chaotic and traumatic: many inmates were detoxing, there was a rapid turnover of prisoners, and a significant proportion of prisoners were vulnerable, self-harming and engaging in other distress-related behaviours including dirty protests.

The greater degree of freedom of movement in the houses was generally felt to improve wellbeing. In addition, many young adults felt more supported by other prisoners in their houses than they did by officers. They also valued not having a toilet in their room. The unique architecture of Styal and its un-prison-like appearance throws into stark relief the contrast between the (at first glance) 'normal' appearance of the buildings and the reality of the prison as a penal, and punitive, institution. One 20-year-old woman explained that she sometimes let her guard down with prison officers because of the prison's appearance:

> Because sometimes it doesn't feel like prison until you're getting restrained, or anything like that. [...] So when some staff speak to me, I forget where I am, and I go, "Oh, bugger off!" And it's like, oh wait, I'm in prison, I can't speak to people like that. Because sometimes you just forget. It doesn't look like a prison. It's houses.

Despite their acknowledged benefits, it was universally acknowledged that there could be a lot of 'drama' in the houses: for example, arguments over vapes, laundry rotas and queuing for food. Thefts were a major issue, and personal property routinely went missing from people's rooms. The prison's layout, with the majority of prisoners in houses with no immediate prison officer oversight, contrasts starkly with the more common cellular wing accommodation in prisons. The house structure means that in practice, prisoners themselves manage the day-to-day running of the houses, devise and maintain rules, and are typically the first line of response in emergency situations, despite that fact that it is prison staff who have a duty of care towards prisoners. While participants generally liked the fact that there were no officers in the houses, they felt responsible – and to an extent, responsibilised – for their fellow prisoners' safety and wellbeing, which could involve substantial emotional and physical labour. One participant articulated this very clearly:

> We have got women who are quite old, and they have like mobility issues, and then as well, like, it sort of seems like it's totally our responsibility. [...] God knows what they would do if we all just went on strike all of a sudden and said, like, you know, "We are not doing it!"

Due to overcrowding, some self-harmers were accommodated in houses, where experienced older prisoners cared for them, applying bandages and monitoring for signs of infection. Other participants discussed having to respond to episodes of challenging behaviour by prisoners who were mentally ill. Prisoners with eating disorders and

physical impairments were also effectively being cared for, unpaid, by housemates amongst whom, one participant reflected, there would usually be at least one woman who had previously worked as a carer or a nurse. Care extended to biohazard training and cleaning up after dirty protests, for which prisoners were paid £5 per session. A very serious drug-related incident had occurred in a house during the fieldwork period, after which one participant had been asked by a governor whether she had sounded the alarm bell immediately. She reflected that a prisoner could have died and that the speed of her response might have contributed to this.

Family support and contact

Maintaining and strengthening women prisoners' family ties is important for rehabilitation, as well as for wellbeing in custody (Farmer, 2019). However, families were very complicated for many of the participants. Young adults are in close temporal proximity to childhood adversity and research demonstrates that the family backgrounds of criminalised girls are often particularly traumatic (Sharpe, 2012; 2024; Staines *et al*., 2024).

As stated above, 11/24 participants were care experienced. Others described neglect by their birth parents, parental addiction, mental ill health and imprisonment, domestic and family violence, and estrangement from, and bereavement of, family members and primary caregivers. A number of participants had assumed a parenting role within their family of origin, looking after younger siblings and sometimes their own parents prior to being imprisoned. One participant disclosed that she was born in Styal and had been named after a prison officer. Another young woman's mother was also serving time in Styal when I interviewed her.

Family contact, both in-person visits and telephone calls, was highly valued and could increase feelings of safety. However, interviewees described in-cell telephones being out of service for several days and referred to prisoners not having cash to purchase sufficient 'phone credit or having to choose between a 'phone call to their child and buying an item from the canteen. Several participants were of the view that prisoners who had no-one sending money in for them, and who consequently received just 50 pence per day from the prison to pay for 'phone calls and canteen purchases, should get automatic 'phone credit if they had no visitors, a system that had been in place during Covid-19 restrictions. In the absence of this, a lack of money on the inside determined, to a significant degree, the level of family contact one could have, as well as access to vapes, snacks, toiletries and other items from the prison canteen. This

resulted in substantial financial inequality between prisoners. As one participant explained:

> …there's, like, the spectrum of who's got private cash [and] who works. So you can either be in jail sat there with nothing, or you can have a £50 job and you're getting £20 off your family every week.

Family days took place in the prison, when prisoners could spend extended periods of time with another adult and up to four children. A relatively small proportion of this study's young adult participants (21%) were mothers. Consequently, several felt disadvantaged because they were not eligible to participate in family days and some suggested that additional visits by family or friends should be permitted for those without children.

The Young Adult Hub

The Young Adult (YA) Hub plugged an important gap in provision within the prison, supporting young adults from the point of arrival. This is particularly significant in the absence of sentence planning and more limited support for remanded prisoners. The YA Hub was used more frequently (and appropriately) by individuals with higher support needs and those with no or less involvement in prison education or employment. Some prison staff and prisoners referred to the YA Hub as the 'youth club'. While this sometimes had pejorative undertones, the setting's 'youth club' feel was a key part of its attraction to the young adults who used it. However, it was clear that a number of young adults – whom I interviewed in the Hub building although some were not regular attendees – saw the YA Hub as somewhat childish and thus not for them.

During workshop discussions about, and observations within, the YA Hub, it was clear that young adults felt able to relax and be themselves to a greater degree than elsewhere in the prison, and most welcomed the opportunity to spend time with other people of their own age and stage of life. They also welcomed the more relaxed rules (or enforcement of rules) in the YA Hub in relation to dress (e.g. exposed midriffs). Participants appreciated the relatively informal space and activities on offer, which allowed them to chat and decompress. Group work activities included baking in the kitchen (this was extremely popular) and crafting. A lot of time was spent simply 'hanging out', as well as doings arts and crafts.

The dedicated YA Hub building, which was only used by young adult prisoners, contributed to its 'different' feel from the rest of the prison. As described earlier, the space was young people friendly in terms of its layout and decoration, and the kitchen, pool room and a sensory room with mood lighting and bean bags were very popular. However, the rooms retained their wash basins and the building had changed little from its earlier use as a houseblock.

The positive reception and more welcoming environment of the YA Hub threw into sharp relief the stressful, negative or 'abnormal' nature of wider prison experiences, which were frequently discussed by participants as being characterised to a degree by an absence of trust, staff who do not keep promises, and being 'fobbed off'. One young woman described the wider prison as an 'eggshell situation'. As reported earlier, the YA Hub was staffed by three dedicated prison officers, including one senior, and a senior forensic psychologist. All staff had chosen, and been selected, to work with young adults, and their dedication and commitment was clear. Without exception, the interview participants commented on the quality and attributes of the Hub staff, as well as their approachability and reliability in getting things done. Examples included immediately collecting prisoners' spectacles and trainers from the prison reception, after participants had asked wing staff repeatedly for several days if they could have their personal possessions. The location of two staff offices on the ground floor, one of which often had its door open, meant that young people regularly chatted to officers informally, asking questions and raising concerns freely. Small numbers notwithstanding, there were staffing changes in the Hub before, during and after the fieldwork. Continuities in personnel are perhaps less noticeable given the transient nature of much (but not all) of this population of prisoners. However, officers' and the psychologist's level of specialist skills and experience were a central feature in young adults' positive evaluations.

Prison staff

Part of each 1:1 interview focused on examining what 'good' relationships and interactions with prison staff look like from young adults' point of view. Officer-prisoner relationships and interactions were also a focus of the drama workshops. 'Good' workers were described as guards (or other prison staff) who are approachable, demonstrate empathy and compassion, take the time to listen and have conversations, are honest and trustworthy and withhold character judgement. It was noted that it was immediately obvious, and could be *felt*, when officers genuinely cared about prisoners.

Good officers were further believed to demonstrate care and, fundamentally, to treat inmates with respect and dignity – as *people*, rather than prisoners; in other words, they 'make you feel like you're not in jail'. Simply setting a good example, and demonstrating empathy and kindness, could potentially have a positive ripple effect on prisoners' individual and collective mood, as well as a lasting impact on individuals. One young woman explained that prisoners often lack positive role models and influences in their lives and that the words and actions of good, kind officers

> stick with you like for life, you know, because it only takes one like good deed or one good conversation for someone to remember it forever.

A recurring example given of 'bad' interactions with guards was when young adults felt dehumanised and treated with condescension, or even disgust, by officers. Being treated with dignity, like a human being, was raised repeatedly. One participant described what she saw as the difference between 'good' and 'bad' interactions with officers:

> …the officers that I do have interactions with, they are good. Yeah, and I feel like, they don't talk to you like you're a prisoner, if that makes sense? So, like, they talk to you like you're just a normal person, which is a good thing. Where some officers actually talk to you like you're a prisoner. And they will refer to you as 'prisoner.'

Another young woman noted the irony of prisoners being judged as 'bad' people: she, in common with over half of the participants in this study, was on remand. She was awaiting trial and thus legally innocent. Another (sentenced) participant described the effects of such character judgement in detail:

> Like, we've already committed our crime, we're doing the punishment for it. We don't need to be treated like we're nothing. We're all still human at the end of the day. […] I've got one conviction, that's it, just one conviction and now I'm a bad character and I'm in prison. […]. But because I'm a prisoner and they're a prison guard you, like, just lose the humanity, and you can just feel it in every interaction, that they're not treating me like a human being. And it really starts to grind you down.

In broader context, not treating prisoners like human beings was suggestive of a belief that some officers are ignorant of the adverse circumstances which often contribute to young women's offending. Some participants also felt that officers did not take their developmental stage into consideration, as this account illustrates:

> [...Good officers] just look at you like, and they just speak to you just like you are a normal person. And that's what we need in here, is to be spoken to like normal people because, you know, I can't speak for everybody, but a lot of us are just normal people who made stupid decisions [...] especially in the younger girls, like, we are young, we are still learning, you know? It's everybody's first time doing life. Everybody is going to make mistakes, you know? [...] I don't want people to jump to the conclusion that I'm a bad person because of one daft thing that I had done, because I'm not a bad person. I am a good person, and it took me so long to get to where I am, like mentally it took me so long to understand myself the way I do now. Like for somebody to just kind of completely dismiss that and act as if...and look at me the way that I used to get looked at in school, it's just, you know, look at me like they are expecting me to do something bad.

The above quote further exemplifies the frequently expressed view that women in prison are seen as bad *people*, rather than people who have made mistakes, or occasionally engaged in bad or illegal *behaviour*. For many of the young adults, professionals' expectations that they would (always) 'do something bad', and resultant disapproval and condemnation, was a consistent feature of their past experiences at school and in other settings.[26]

On the wing, where there were more frequent interactions between guards and prisoners through the day and night, participants described officers loudly banging doors when they could close them more gently, shouting at prisoners, and not referring to individuals by name, as recounted by this young adult:

> ...speak to them [*prisoners*] with respect. Just respect. Life doesn't need to be made any harder. There's no need to have a power trip and talk down to people. Treat people like you would want to be treated.

[26] See Sharpe (2024) for a detailed discussion of trans-institutional stigmatisation in the lives of criminalised young women.

Being treated with condescension and a lack of respect was, unsurprisingly, experienced as additional punishment over and above the deprivations of imprisonment.

Prison officer gender

Some participants believed strongly that male officers should not work in women's prisons, but that other prison staff who did not enter cells could be men. Several interviewees commented that it was clear that some male bank officers covering for staff absences were used to working in the men's estate, where a more military, loud and rule-bound style was seen as necessary to maintain order. However, this was not appropriate in the women's estate where, one woman explained, 'we're a bit more sensitive than men.' It also undermined safety. Another participant elucidated:

> Yeah, it's very like inhumane in a sense like, especially the men, I feel like the men are like meaner than the women, or they bark at you and they are just [...] very loud and angry, and they don't really listen to you when you try to talk. They are just like, "Do this, do that!", like very dismissive. And yeah, I don't think it's really fair, because I don't think prisoners really ask for much, they kind of just want to be heard. And then it's like, when you are being like shut down or like dismissed then it just kind of like, I don't know, tears at your spirit or something. Because it's like, if a regular human being cannot listen to me, you know, how can I feel safe?

When male officers, usually larger in stature and physically stronger than young women, shouted or banged doors, these traits could be reminiscent of domestic and child abuse and violence or coercive control experienced on the outside. Several participants alluded to (some) officers abusing their power. One young adult who was on remand recounted an officer loudly shouting and swearing at a distressed prisoner who was repeatedly banging her head against her cell wall, calling her a 'dickhead'. She remarked that the officer must have known that he could be overheard by many other prisoners which, in her view, indicated that he knew he would not be held accountable.

Others expressed more positive views about male guards. This included the belief that it is easier to joke and engage in 'banter' with male officers, who were seen by some as more relaxed and friendly. Such views of course raise questions about professional boundaries. Indeed, other young adults questioned the appropriateness of some male guards' interactions with young women prisoners and gave examples of male officers flirting or making misogynistic remarks about dress, weight and sexual orientation.

Several examples of good practice by male guards were shared, including an instance where a male officer had comforted a prisoner after she had received bad news:

> She was all emotional and the house officer that was on at the time, he come upstairs, put his hand on her shoulder and he said, "It's all going to be okay. I'm going to get a female officer, because obviously I want to give you a hug, but I can't." So he got another officer over so they could give her a hug, to show her that he cares. [...] And then he suddenly went out and he got other support she needed. He sorted everything out for her, because he'd seen that she needed it. And it was just nice to see that he was actually doing his job. And that anything you ask him, he'll go do straightaway.

Notwithstanding these different perspectives, it was clear that some male officers were widely respected and liked. One particular older and very experienced male guard was frequently held up as an example of the 'ideal' prison officer.

Responsiveness

Officers failing to follow up on promised actions was a common complaint amongst the young adults. This was discussed in the context of retrieving personal possessions, as well as (not) being collected and escorted to appointments, work or activities. Almost every participant recounted asking an officer to help them with something and being 'fobbed off' and told either that the officer did not know the answer or that s/he would return to help later. A handful of the young adults believed that certain officers failed to collect them for appointments 'out of spite', although the majority blamed understaffing. There is, however, a thin line between being too busy and being perceived not to care. A key implication of this finding is that officers need to be (made) aware that something that to them might seem an insignificant oversight or an impossible demand due to conflicting responsibilities – for example, not collecting a prisoner to escort her to a scheduled appointment or activity, or not locating and returning her footwear – can have a substantial impact on a prisoner's mental health and functioning, and even on income from work or eligibility for home detention curfew.

Numerous participants, notably those who had been imprisoned for longer and/or had previously spent time in a different prison, highlighted the impact of understaffing, particularly on the wing where crises more often occurred. A plethora of complex

issues on the wing co-occurred with staff absences and frequent bank staff cover. Some participants noted that prison officers were overworked and appeared stressed and exhausted, and that some were working overtime and extra night shifts, which could limit their patience. Understaffing limits the time officers have available to stop and chat, with serious implications for self-harming individuals. Bank staff who worked in the prison only occasionally had not built relationships or gained knowledge about individual prisoners, which is a particular concern for prisoners who are younger, first-timers, neurodivergent or have complex or additional needs. This could lead to a spiral of increased self-injury and further crisis intervention.

In addition to understaffing, overcrowding also had an impact on life and relations within the houses. One young adult on an enhanced regime explained that, when she had first arrived at the prison two years earlier prisoners had to be 'squeaky clean' (i.e. drug-free) with exemplary behaviour in order to be placed in an 'enhanced' house; however, more recently, 'half the house' she lived in were using drugs. This shift, which made her feel less safe, was due to a need to fill all bed spaces in the overcrowded prison. Some women living in non-enhanced houses also had higher support needs than previously for the same reason.

Understanding young adults' needs

Part of each interview focused on the specific needs and experiences of young adults, including what participants thought prison staff need to know about young adult prisoners, as well as their views about the YA Hub. The very specific combination of high levels of need in relation to trauma, mental health and neurodivergence, differing levels of maturity, and the usually extremely short, transient and uncertain nature of imprisonment for the majority of young adult women, poses significant challenges for responding to this group. It is worth repeating that more than half of the research participants were on remand and almost two-thirds were in prison for the first time. While it was clear that there was a degree of 'mothering' and being looked after by older prisoners (some participants said they were referred to as 'babies'), older prisoners may exploit young women due to their age and prison inexperience. One interviewee explained that young adults could be asked to transport items across the jail grounds, and that some saw this as a privilege. They are also at high risk of being deceived and getting into debt.

Several participants discussed prejudicial stereotypes about younger prisoners that, they believed, were held by both guards and older inmates. These included that young

adults are 'more crazy' and 'cause mayhem', and that it is assumed they are 'going to be trouble'. One young adult seemed to endorse this view, stating that young adults are 'usually up all night, screaming and shouting, shagging.' Young adults may be taken less seriously and their views or opinions more easily dismissed. The prison's policy that young adults aged 20 and below cannot share cells with older women meant that some younger adults were not allowed to share with friends or co-defendants whose support they may have benefited from. While this policy makes sense from the point of view of potential exploitation, individual circumstances and support needs may indicate that sharing a cell with a prisoner who is 21 or over may sometimes be appropriate.

Young women in conflict with the law have often had to be self-reliant and prematurely take on many adult responsibilities while transitioning into adulthood, and to a far greater degree than their non-criminalised peers. Many have also experienced things that young people should not have to deal with and have, to varying degrees, missed out on childhood. One young woman commented positively that she felt like she was 'allowed to be a kid' in the YA Hub. Another participant made the important point that there is no legitimate means of 'letting off steam' in prison. The implication is that reactions to frustration and distress should be recognised as such, and met with patience, allowing space and avoiding sanctions unless absolutely necessary. Several participants also observed that young adults have limited life experience (this group also, importantly, has limited prison experience), and thus need more guidance.

The dedicated YA Hub staff were universally deemed to be welcoming, responsive, and to create a safe environment. They were unequivocally viewed as 'good' prison officers. As one young woman put it, they 'just get us'. This contrasted with participants' perceptions of officers in the wider prison who, one individual stated, 'don't really communicate with us. They just walk around and that. And they just… don't have that approachable look that these [YA Hub] guys have.' It is probably not coincidental that the YA Hub staff were all women at the time this research took place. It was clear during interview conversations as well as direct observation that the higher levels of prisoner-officer contact facilitated by the more relaxed setting of the YA Hub, as well as the Hub staffs' skills, experience and commitment to working with young adults (a role that was clearly not universally popular), meant that YA Hub staff were able to assess and respond well to young adult prisoners in an individualised manner. Complaints made about inconsistent enforcement of dress codes, which appeared to be opaque and relatively subjective, as well as vaping rules, did not extend to YA Hub staff. Importantly, officers in the YA Hub recognised young adults' unique and differing needs, interests, strengths and maturity levels. As one young woman explained:

> Yeah, like, they know what you would be really good at, but then they also know what you wouldn't enjoy. So, they just sort of, they watch your personality, they watch your character, and you with other people and things like that. And then they take that and say, "Oh, this will be really good for you," or "You won't do really well in that, so try this." And I think it's really good.

The final section of this report outlines the key implications of the research findings in relation to policy and practice with young adults in the women's secure estate and for their safety in custody.

Implications

Young adult-specific provision in the women's custodial estate

- HMP/YOI Styal's Young Adult Hub model of a separate, but non-residential, space within the prison staffed by dedicated staff improved imprisoned young adults' feelings of safety. Most young adult prisoners felt safer and more secure in the Young Adult Hub than in some other areas of the prison.

- The informal, youth club-like atmosphere of the Young Adult Hub, and the opportunity to be amongst same-aged peers, were welcomed. However, there is scope for more structured and targeted activities. Future development of the service could consider removing internal walls to allow space for two groups to take place simultaneously.

- Experienced, skilled and motivated female staff who understand and are responsive to young adults' needs, including needs relating to trauma and neurodivergence, have a positive impact on prisoners' feelings of safety.

- More than half of the participants in this study were believed to be neurodivergent, 46% were care experienced and 46% were homeless prior to entering prison. A key priority for young adult women should be the provision of age and gender-specific accommodation in the community and support and planning for release.

Safety

- Young women aged 18-24 account for 35% of recorded self-harm incidents in the women's custodial estate. Gender, young age and remand status are all risk factors for self-harm. This knowledge should be foregrounded in all interactions with this group.

- Living surrounded by self-harm, suicide attempts and mentally unwell women constitutes vicarious trauma for both prisoners and staff. Therapeutic support for both groups would be considered appropriate, indeed essential, in any other setting.

- There were disturbing accounts in this research of young women being restrained by multiple men, including in the showers. Consistent with Rule 81 of the UN Standard Minimum Rules for the Treatment of Prisoners (the Nelson Mandela Rules), there should be a strong presumption in favour of female prison officers. This is

particularly important in private spaces. This presumption should extend to the recruitment of emergency cover staff in the women's estate.

- Slow and/or inadequate staff responses to routine requests for help, due in large part to understaffing, is a significant issue that can increase risk of self-harm and challenging behaviour.

- Trans male prisoners were widely accepted and included by their cisgender female peers, and their presence in the prison and the Young Adult Hub did not appear to be considered problematic amongst this group.

Staff-prisoner relations

- The very specific combination of high levels of need in relation to trauma, care experience, mental health and neurodivergence, and differing levels of maturity, combined with the usually extremely short, transient and uncertain nature of imprisonment for the majority of young adult women, poses significant challenges for responding to and managing this group. Working with young adults in the women's custodial estate requires significant skill and dedication. Prison governors should acknowledge this and support staff to reduce risk of burnout.

- Many criminalised young women have histories of welfare inaction and difficult interactions with authority figures. They are also highly stigmatised. This may result in recalcitrance and a lack of trust. Younger people may also be more sensitive to criticism.

- It should be recognised that young adults in prison may find it more difficult than older prisoners to manage their emotions and they may be more impulsive. It is important to allow space for young adult prisoners to be exuberant, let off steam and express frustration, and to afford them a greater degree of patience and tolerance.

- A higher level of personal support and human contact may be required by young adults. However, there is a risk of infantilisation. Several young women commented that, despite their young age, they were sometimes locked up by men and women even younger than they were.

- The nature of this population of prisoners presents particular challenges for structured groupwork. Very high levels of trauma, neurodivergence and sometimes psychosocial immaturity are likely to affect group dynamics. The transitory and

often uncertain nature of imprisonment for the very high proportion of remanded and short-sentenced prisoners presents further challenges.

Sentencing and remand

- A large majority of young adult women in prison, and five out of six young women aged 18-20, are remanded or sentenced to six months or less in custody. It is very difficult to undertake any meaningful work in such a short timeframe. The stigma of imprisonment for women casts a long shadow over their lives that endures well after release, with significant consequences for desistance from crime, employment prospects and mental health. More than any other group, the necessity of imprisonment for the majority of young adult women is highly questionable. There should be a stronger presumption against the use of custody, and particularly custodial remand, for young adult women.[27] This should not be contingent on their status as mothers.

[27] The research described in this report took place prior to the Sentencing Act 2026. The Act introduced a presumption to suspend custodial sentences of twelve months or less. It also amended the Bail Act 1976, aiming to reduce the use of custodial remand when there is 'no real prospect of immediate custody', and to increase the use of electronic monitoring on bail as an alternative to remand. The Bail Act was further amended to include explicit reference to pregnancy, primary caregiving responsibility and a history of domestic abuse victimisation as potentially relevant factors in remand decision-making. While these changes have been broadly welcomed, it is important that their impact on young adult women specifically is monitored, not least since younger women are less likely to be pregnant or primary caregivers, and arguably more likely to be homeless, than women over the age of 25.

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