

# YOUNG ADULTS TODAY

Key Data on 16-25 year-olds  
Transitions, Disadvantage and Crime

Kerry Devitt, Lucy Knighton, Kevin Lowe





## Young People in Focus (YPF)

Young People in Focus was founded in 1989 as the Trust for the Study of Adolescence (TSA). The name was modernised in 2009 as part of the organisation's 20th anniversary celebrations.

YPF helps individuals and organisations working with young people and families to provide better services by:

- carrying out research and evaluating services
- running projects that develop professional practice
- producing practical resources such as guides, toolkits and training packs
- training professionals in a range of topics
- influencing policy-makers.

YPF works across the UK and covers: health and emotional well-being; learning and education; parenting and family life; youth social action and participation; youth justice.

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## The Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A)

The T2A Alliance (convened by the Barrow Cadbury Trust) is a broad coalition of organisations and individuals working to improve the opportunities and life chances of young people in their transition to adulthood, who are at risk of committing crime and falling into the criminal justice system. The T2A Alliance aims to raise awareness of the problems this group face and to secure policy change to improve their lives.

[www.t2a.org.uk/alliance](http://www.t2a.org.uk/alliance)

[www.bctrust.org.uk/](http://www.bctrust.org.uk/)

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# FOREWORD

*Young Adults Today* is an important publication which forms a key part of an initiative called Transition to Adulthood or T2A. The aim of the initiative, which has been established by the Barrow Cadbury Trust, is to stimulate fresh thinking about how as a society we meet the needs of young people between the ages of 18 and their mid twenties – in particular those who find themselves in conflict with the law. This is a group which has been relatively neglected in criminal justice policymaking. Unlike juveniles under 18, women and offenders with mental health problems, there has been relatively little debate about the adequacy of our existing systems and how we could do better. This is surprising, for as this volume shows, young adults commit a disproportionate amount of crime, tend to receive more custodial sentences than other age groups and are reconvicted more than other older adults.

Barrow Cadbury has funded a range of work to increase knowledge about the characteristics of young adults, develop policy proposals relevant to their needs and test out practical approaches to preventing offending, reducing the use of prison and improving resettlement outcomes. The T2A Alliance, of which Young People in Focus is an important member, is coordinating the programme and ensuring that the lessons are shared with politicians, policy makers and practitioners. We have launched a Green paper *A New Start: Young Adults in the Criminal Justice System* and plan a manifesto for later in the year.

Reliable data is of course the cornerstone of successful policy development and this volume for the first time collects together what is known about this age group across a range of dimensions. It sets out very clearly the challenges involved in helping young people make successful transitions to adulthood and will prove an invaluable source for all of us involved in that work.

**Rob Allen**

*Chair T2A Alliance*

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We would also like to thank the members of the T2A alliance for their advice, especially Jon Collins from the Criminal Justice Alliance, whose input was invaluable for the chapter on crime and justice, and Rob Allen, the T2A Chair and Director of the International Centre for Prison Studies at Kings College, London for his suggestions about content and for his thoughtful foreword. Thanks also go to Debi Roker from Young People in Focus for her assistance in the final stages of this book's development, and to Helen Beauvais at Creative Media Colour for design and layout. Finally, an important thank you to John Coleman who created *Key Data on Adolescence*, the original concept for this publication.

We are pleased that we are able to publish *Young Adults Today* to help mark the 20th Anniversary of Trust for the Study of Adolescence, now known as Young People in Focus.

*Kerry Devitt, Lucy Knighton and Kevin Lowe*

## A note on the data

The data in this publication has been collected from various national data sets and from large-scale, quantitative research surveys. Where there was a paucity of data in a given area, smaller studies and qualitative studies have also been used. The use of smaller studies however, has been minimal. Some of the main surveys that have been used are:

- Office for National Statistics, Social Trends (nos. 38 and 39)
- Office for National Statistics, Population Trends (nos. 134 and 135)
- Office for National Statistics, General Household Survey
- Office for National Statistics, Labour Force Survey
- National Health Service, National Health Survey for England, 2007
- Samaritans. (2009). Suicide in the UK and Republic of Ireland, Statistics 1998-2007
- And various publications from the Department for Children, Schools and Families and the Ministry of Justice.

The data collected primarily covers young adults aged 16-24. However, on occasions we have broadened the age-range out to 15-25 year olds. This is due to available data being grouped in these categories. For example, the Ministry of Justice uses the age-band of 18-20 in its definition of young adults, the national health survey for England terms young adults as those aged 16-24, and the British Crime Survey groups young adults in the 18-25 category.

The data we have used mainly relates to young adults in England and Wales, however some topic areas do explore trends amongst young adults in other parts of the UK.

The data inevitably has some limitations, specifically in areas such as suicide and self-harm. The reasons for this are that suicide and undetermined deaths can be inconclusive, so statistics only give us a broad picture of what is happening. And with self-harm, such behaviour often goes on undetected so any conclusions that are drawn from the data must keep in mind that this probably isn't showing the true extent of self-harm. Also, data that looks at specific groups of young adults – i.e. those who are vulnerable and those who are offenders – is not as robust as data on all young adults. This is because the data sets are often small, are sometimes qualitative and often are not updated on a regular basis, as is the case with other large scale surveys. Data in these areas is therefore not always as current as other data on wider, more general topics. Finally, the crime data is particularly complex with terminology often crucial. For example the way in which the term 'indictable offences' is used in the Ministry of Justice's Criminal Statistics differs slightly from the traditional legal sense of the term (a crime that can only be tried in a Crown Court), so there is inevitably the need for caution when interpreting the information.

Most of the pictures that appear in this publication are posed by models. The people depicted in the pictures have no association with the topics they are featured with.

The models we would like to thank in particular are: Chris Brown, Cate Chapman, Tanny Chiu, Ed George, Mark Peter Jenner, Richa Kaul Padte, Sophie Knighton, Laura Riggs, Sam Packham-O'Brien, Sam Stephen, Kathryn Wallis, Ciaran Whitehead and Christopher Washington.

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# INTRODUCTION

When do we become an adult? At 16, when you can legally have sex, or maybe at 18 because you can vote? Or is it when you get a job or get your own place to live?

Ideas about what constitutes adulthood change over time and vary between (and within) cultural groups. For example, in England in the Middle Ages there was no uniform age of maturity, though 'childhood' was certainly a briefer period than today. The markers of adulthood differed depending on social class and gender and were not necessarily earlier than in modern times. In fact for some writers at the time, *adolescentia* ended only at age 35 (Shahar, 1990).

The 'age of majority', a somewhat arcane phrase today, relates to the legal age when a young person is no longer considered a minor. In the UK it is not clear-cut, with a variety of ages applying to when a young person has the legal right to marry (with or without parental consent), buy alcohol, drive or be considered responsible for criminal actions. The voting age is seen by many as the official marker of adulthood. Of course, it has not always been 18. It became 21 for all males, and 30 for females, in 1918 (extended to all women over 21 in 1928). Notions of 'keys to the door' and age 21 seem linked with the voting age which was reduced to 18 in 1972. And of course, many are now arguing for the voting age to be reduced to 16.

Sociologists argue that it is important to recognise that terms like 'adult', 'young person' and 'adolescent' embody the ideas of their time and should be understood as 'social constructs' that take into account gender, class and ethnicity (France, 2007).

Pioneering genetic psychologist, G Stanley Hall's mammoth, two-volume work *Adolescence* (1904) paved the way for 20th century thinking on this topic, even though his ideas were rooted in the previous century. He characterised the period between childhood and adulthood as a time of 'storm and stress' before a more stable equilibrium is reached in adulthood. And although modern research has rejected this view as a universal portrayal of adolescence (Adams et al, 1996), the concept is still very much part of current popular thinking.

The developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst Erikson's ideas have also been influential, particularly around the idea of life stages and their associated 'developmental tasks'. His Eight Ages of Man included Youth/Adolescence and Young Adulthood (Erikson, 1950). Other theorists such as the sociologists Parsons (1942) and Eisenstadt (1956) focused on age differentiation and the function of adolescence in the transition to adulthood.

Yet, although Hall conceptualised the period of adolescence as covering the years 14-24, it was not until the rise of the 'teenager' in popular culture from around 1945 that a distinct age band began to form around adolescence.

Concepts of adolescence and adulthood have also been crystallised in popular culture, often through music. For example, Judy Garland's 1939 hit *In-Between* captured some of the dilemmas of adolescence in lines such as

*I'm too old for toys and too young for boys – I'm just an in-between.*  
(Various artists, 2009)

Garland's recording featured the perspective of a young woman, a point of view that had received limited attention. Certainly most theorising about youth between the 1930s and the late 1960s focused on boys (France, 2007).

More recent thinking about human development (Adams et al, 1996) has seen greater emphasis placed on the importance of the interaction between biology and context, including social and political change. This has led some commentators to note that the transition to adulthood is being increasingly delayed with entry into the labour market generally happening later, which makes young people economically dependent longer. At the same time, puberty (often seen as the marker of the end of childhood) may be starting earlier resulting in young people maturing earlier socially and sexually. For some, this means that the period of adolescence has extended.

Others, notably Arnett (2004) have focused specifically on young adulthood as a distinct period in human development. He coined the term 'emerging adulthood' which embraces a period 'from the late teens through the twenties'. Recognising that changes in society have meant that some of the traditional markers of adulthood such as becoming economically independent, marrying, and having children are happening later (if they happen at all), other indicators of adulthood are emerging such as 'accepting responsibility for one's actions' and 'making independent decisions' (Arnett, 2004). Critics of Arnett's concept question the value of age-based life stages and argue that a more holistic 'lifespan' model is a better way of understanding human development (Hendry and Kloep, 2007).

Increasing knowledge about brain development shows that the brain continues to mature into at least the mid twenties, particularly in the areas of judgement, reasoning and impulse control (Giedd et al, 2007). If adulthood is about a certain kind of maturity, then this supports the view that it happens later. This has led some to question the appropriateness of the current ages of criminal responsibility in the UK (age 10 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland and age eight in Scotland).

The changes in society described above are not affecting all young people equally. Indeed, there is a strong case to say that there are particularly negative effects for those who are most disadvantaged, especially families living in poverty.

The Social Exclusion Unit's report in 2005 focused on issues for young adults (16-25) with 'complex needs' and made the point that the transition to adulthood is more difficult if you have to deal with one or more of the following issues: 'poor housing, homelessness, substance misuse, mental health issues, poor health, poor education or long-term unemployment' (SEU, 2005).

A crucial point made in the report is that better resourced and well-supported young people are now experiencing 'slow-track' transitions to adulthood that typically involves staying on in post-compulsory education, delaying the start of full-time employment and becoming parents in their late twenties or early thirties. On the other hand, those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds tend to take a 'fast track' route to adulthood which includes finishing education at or before the minimum age, unemployment or insecure badly-paid work and early parenthood, with all the attendant risks these combinations bring.

This publication has been produced to play a part in helping improve services for young adults. As part of the work of Barrow Cadbury Trust's Transition to Adulthood Alliance (T2A) we are acutely aware of the fact that those from disadvantaged backgrounds (often with troubled family lives), form the majority of the young adults who get involved in the criminal justice system (T2A, 2009a).

Services have not kept pace with the changing position of young adults. In the commercial world, the age boundaries that denote adulthood vary considerably. For example, bus companies generally charge adult fares to young people aged over 16 years. At the other end of the age continuum, many retailers now require proof of age from young adults who appear under the age of 25 before they will sell them alcohol.

In relation to health, social care and justice the organisation of services also seems a poor fit for young adults. Generally age 18 marks the dividing line between services for children and those for adults, although government has stressed the need to work creatively around these boundaries (DH, 2006).

Some especially vulnerable groups have their entitlement to services extended beyond 18, such as young people leaving care, and the Connexions service in England covers ages 13-19 and will extend to 25 for young adults with learning difficulties or disabilities. But disabled young people and their families do not get necessarily get the co-ordinated, intensive support that they need when moving between children's services and adults' services (HM Treasury & DfES, 2007). For disabled young people the term 'transition to adulthood' is often primarily about a transition between services rather than about genuine changes in life stages.

Equally, adult services often have different priorities that are more attuned to older adults rather than to the younger group. For example, adults' drugs services are generally centred on the use of opiates, which reflects older adults' patterns of drug use rather than those of younger adults where cannabis or mixed drug use is more common.

Mental health services also struggle to bridge the gap between services for young people and adults. Some young people who were well supported by adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) find that they do not fit the criteria for support by the adult mental health service (AMHS) (Singh et al, 2005).

In the criminal justice system, the specific needs of young adults had been recognised by the sentence of Detention to a Young Offenders Institution (DYOI) that was available for young adults aged 18-21, although this does not prevent some young adults being held with older adults. Plans to extend the resources and regimes that have been put in place for the under 18s since 1998 have not happened. Also, the limited protection that the DYOI provided for 18-21 year old offenders was removed in the 2000 Criminal Justice and Court Services Act (though these provisions have not as yet been implemented). This has caused concern for many involved in the criminal justice system including the Chief Inspector of Prisons who stated:

*This leaves young adult prisoners very exposed: facing the loss of the legal protection of a separate status, and in a prison system whose resources and capacity are seriously over-stretched... there will be no restrictions on holding over-18 young men in any prison in the country.*

(HM Chief Inspector of Prisons, 2006)

On current reoffending rates, 70% of young adults (18-24) are likely to re-offend within two years of release. The Barrow Cadbury Trust's Transition to Adulthood (T2A) Alliance has been convened to campaign for more effective ways of supporting this age group (T2A, 2009b).

*Young Adults Today* is part of the work of the T2A alliance. Because the current issues facing young adults seem poorly understood we have drawn together for the first time, a wealth of information about the lives of those aged 16-25. We have tried to tell the story of change over recent decades for *all* young people, but to highlight the specific issues that relate to vulnerable and disadvantaged young adults. Given the focus of the work of the T2A Alliance, we have also given emphasis to information about young adults and the criminal justice system.

*Young Adults Today* covers: population and social trends; vulnerable young people; education, employment and training; physical and mental health; lifestyles and social participation; and crime. It shows that young adults today are staying in education and training longer, are more financially dependent than in recent decades and consequently more likely to be living with their parents. They are delaying marriage and having children in their late twenties or thirties. Yet for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds the picture is often different, with them leaving home much earlier, starting families earlier and experiencing high levels of unemployment. *Young Adults Today* is a unique and comprehensive digest of facts that paints a compelling picture of young adults in modern Britain.

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