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Needs and characteristics of young adults in custody: Results from the Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR) survey

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This report summarises the needs and characteristics of young adults (18–20 years old) on reception to custody. Data for this report come from Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR), a longitudinal cohort study of 1,435 adult prisoners sentenced to between one month and four years in prison in 2005 and 2006, and the Police National Computer (PNC). The report compares the characteristics and needs of young adults in custody with prisoners aged 21 years and over.

Key findings

- Young adult SPCR respondents in custody shared a number of needs and background characteristics with SPCR prisoners aged 21 and over, with all ages reporting high levels of need in terms of employment, education and substance misuse. However there were a number of differences, which included:
 - Young adults were more likely than older prisoners to report issues with schooling, with large proportions reporting having regularly played truant (72% compared with 57%) and having been temporarily excluded (80%) or permanently expelled (58%) from school (80% compared with 61% and 58% compared with 40%, respectively).
 - Young adults who reported being unemployed in the four weeks before custody were more likely to report that they were looking for work or training during this time (62%) compared with older prisoners (35%). Young adults were also more likely to state that having a job when released would stop them from re-offending (81% compared with 66% of older prisoners).
 - Fewer young adults reported needing help finding a place to live when released (23% compared with 39% of older prisoners).
 - Young adults entering custody were less likely than prisoners aged 21 and over to report needing help with a medical problem (10% compared to 20%) and less likely to be assessed as suffering from both anxiety and depression (15% compared with 27%).
 - Compared with older prisoners, young adults were less likely to report needing help with a drug problem (15% compared with 33%). Young adults were less likely than older prisoners to report having used a Class A drug in the four weeks before custody (31% compared with 45%). A smaller proportion of young adults than older prisoners linked their offending behaviour with drugs (25% compared with 46%). On the other hand, a larger proportion of young adults compared with older prisoners linked their offending behaviour with alcohol use (42% compared with 30%) and stated that not drinking too much alcohol would be important in stopping them from re-offending in the future (47% compared with 32%).
- Reporting feeling looked after on entry to prison, treated like an individual, feeling worried and confused or feeling extremely alone, did not vary by age group. These experiences were more likely to vary according to whether the respondent had been previously sentenced to imprisonment, for both young adults and for older prisoners.

Background

In November 2013, the Ministry of Justice (MoJ) published its consultation *Transforming Management of Young Adults in Custody*,¹ which proposes new arrangements for the accommodation of young adults (those aged 18–20 years old) sentenced to custody, with a focus on need and risk rather than on age. The new framework proposes all young adults should be accommodated in institutions alongside older prisoners, where resources are targeted according to risk, and rehabilitation and resettlement needs. In this context, this report examines the needs and characteristics of young adults, and how these may differ from older adult prisoners.²

Offenders sentenced to custody of all ages tend to have high levels of need. Research by Lader *et al.* (2000) has pointed to low educational attainment by young offenders (defined as 16–20 years in that report), high levels of substance abuse and mental health disorders, as well as experiencing being taken into local authority care and other stressful life events.³ Although prisoners as a whole are likely to share these characteristics,⁴ it has been suggested that working with younger offenders presents an opportunity to intervene to improve outcomes and reduce re-offending.⁵

The evidence for this report comes from Surveying Prisoner Crime Reduction (SPCR), a longitudinal cohort study of 1,435 adults sentenced to between one month and four years in England and Wales in 2005 and 2006. This sample is representative of most adults (>90%) sentenced during the period. The sample includes 174 adults aged 18 to 20.

This summary brings together relevant previously published results from SPCR⁶ with further analysis

on the differences in needs and characteristics of young adults and older prisoners.

Aim

The aim of this report is to describe the needs and characteristics of young adults in custody, compared with prisoners aged 21 and over (also referred to in this report as ‘older adults’ or ‘older prisoners’). It summarises results on:

- childhood and family background;
- employment, training and education;
- accommodation;
- health/mental health;
- substance misuse;
- experiences on entry to prison; and
- re-offending on release from prison.

Approach

The analysis was based on Sample 1, Wave 1 of SPCR, a large, general-purpose longitudinal cohort study of adult (age 18+) prisoners, consisting of interviews on reception to prison (Wave 1), prior to release (Wave 2) and post-release (Waves 3 and 4). The prisoners were sentenced in 2005 and 2006 to between one month and four years, and served their sentences in England and Wales. Sample 1 is representative of prison receptions with these sentence lengths.⁷ Participants were asked about previous contact with the criminal justice system; accommodation and relationships; physical and mental health; employment; qualifications; attitudes on re-offending; and drug and alcohol use. Details of the sample methodology, response rates and questionnaires are published in the SPCR technical reports.⁸

Differences between young adults and older adults were tested using the 99% significance level.⁹ The results are presented in tables throughout this report, but the accompanying text only describes differences that were statistically significant (unless otherwise stated).

¹ Ministry of Justice (2013a).

² It was anticipated that the Government Response to the consultation would be published in Spring 2014. However, following the announcement in February 2014 of the Government’s intention to hold an independent review into self-inflicted deaths of 18-24 year olds, the responses to the consultation will now be considered alongside the review process. We will issue the Government response to the consultation having taken into account the responses and the recommendations from the review. This report is published pending the outcome of the consultation and the findings and implications will be taken into account in the Government response to the consultation.

³ Lader *et al.* (2000).

⁴ See for example Singleton *et al.* (1998); Cunliffe *et al.* (2012); Williams *et al.* (2012); Light *et al.* (2013).

⁵ HM Inspectorate of Prisons (2006).

⁶ Cunliffe *et al.* (2012); Hopkins (2012); Williams *et al.* (2012a, 2012b); Light *et al.* (2013).

⁷ A second sample, Sample 2, is representative of longer-term (18 months to four years) sentenced prison receptions.

⁸ Available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/results-from-the-surveying-prisoner-crime-reduction-survey>

⁹ i.e. there is only a 1% chance that differences observed between the two groups are a result of chance.

General population comparisons are provided where these are available. Supporting tables for all figures are published alongside this report.

Limitations

Results presented here are based on 174 18–20 year old prisoners (12% of the sample), and can be considered as indicative of the differences/similarities of young adult prisoners compared with older (aged 21+) prisoners (88% of the sample). However, given the sample size, results should be considered with caution where more detailed breakdowns are made.

Table 1. Prison reception statistics: prisoners serving up to four years, by age (2013)

Factor		18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Gender	Male	95	90	91
	Female	5	10	9
Ethnicity	White	77	82	81
	BAME ¹⁰	22	17	18
	Unrecorded/not stated	1	1	1
Age	18–20	100	–	11
	21–24	–	19	17
	25–29	–	22	19
	30–39	–	34	30
	40–49	–	18	16
	50+	–	7	7
Sentence length	Fine defaulter	< 1	2	1
	≤ 6 months	49	54	52
	> 6 months ≤ 1 year	11	11	12
	> 12 months ≤ 4 years	40	33	35
Offence group (self-reported)	Fine defaulter	0	1	1
	Violence	21	18	19
	Robbery	10	2	3
	Burglary	11	8	8
	Other	26	25	25
	Drugs	8	8	26
	Sexual offences	1	2	2
	Theft and handling	17	28	26
	Motoring	3	5	5
	Fraud	1	3	3
Not recorded	0	0	0	
Total		8,072	63,169	71,241

¹⁰ Black, Asian, or Minority Ethnic

SPCR is based on participant responses. It is not known whether there are differences in terms of reliability of self-report data by age group.

SPCR Sample 1, Wave 1 (reception) interviews were conducted in 2005/6, and there are some differences between sample characteristics and more recent (2013) prison reception statistics for prisoners serving up to four years (Table 1).¹¹ In particular, the SPCR sample had a smaller proportion of Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) young adults (see Table 2), who represented 22% of young adult receptions among those serving up to four years in 2013, and 15% of SPCR Sample 1.

SPCR sample characteristics

Tables 2 and 3 provide SPCR sample characteristics, by age group. There were no significant differences between young adults and prisoners aged 21 and over in terms of gender and ethnic background, however they were more likely to report being single, as would be expected given their age. They were broadly similar in terms of offence group, with most serving sentences for 'other' offences, violence and motoring offences, although they were more likely than older prisoners to be serving their sentence for robbery.

Table 2. SPCR Sample 1 demographics by age group¹²

Factor		18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Gender	Male	95	90	91
	Female	5	10	9
Ethnic background	White	85	84	84
	BAME	15	16	16
Age	18–20	100	0	12
	21–24		24	21
	25–29		26	23
	30–39		33	29
	40–49		14	12
	50+		4	3
Marital status	Single*	84	58	61
	Living with partner*	15	25	24
	Married*	1	9	8
	Divorced*	0	5	5
	Widowed	0	1	< 1
	Separated	0	3	2
Total		174	1,261	1,435

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

¹¹ Ministry of Justice (2013b).

¹² Some figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding.

Young adults were less likely to be serving sentences of six months or less compared with older prisoners – 51% were serving sentences of less than six months compared with 68% of prisoners aged 21 and over, and conversely a greater proportion of young adults were serving sentences of more than one year up to 18 months (14% compared to 5%), and more than two years up to three years (10% compared to 5%).¹³

This may reflect the fact that young adults tend to receive custodial sentences for more serious offences, as noted above.

Young adults were less likely to report having been previously sentenced to imprisonment compared with older prisoners (44% compared with 75%).

Table 3: SPCR Sample 1: current sentence by age group

Factor		18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Sentence length	≤ 6 months*	51	68	66
	> 6 months ≤ 1 year	16	15	15
	> 1 year ≤ 18 months*	14	5	6
	> 18 months ≤ 2 years	9	4	5
	> 2 ≤ 3 years*	10	5	6
	> 3 ≤ 4 years	1	3	2
Offence group (self-reported)	Other	21	21	21
	Violence	19	16	17
	Motoring	16	18	18
	Theft and handling	14	21	21
	Robbery*	7	1	2
	Burglary	9	6	6
	Unknown	7	7	7
	Drugs	6	5	5
	Sexual	1	1	1
	Fraud	1	3	3
In prison before	Yes*	44	75	71
	No*	56	25	29
Total		174	1,261	1,435

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Results

Childhood and family background

Respondents were asked about who they lived with up to the age of 17. Overall, 24% stated that they had lived in some sort of local authority care during

their childhoods (Williams *et al.*, 2012a), and this did not vary significantly by age group (Table 4).

Respondents were also asked about experiences in childhood, such as experiencing abuse, observing violence, and playing truant from school (Table 4). Seventeen per cent of young adults reported ever having experienced some sort of abuse (emotional, physical or sexual) as a child, which was significantly lower than the proportion of prisoners aged 21 and over reporting the same (30%). There was no significant difference in the reporting of having observed violence in the home, with approximately two-fifths of each group reporting this.

Large proportions of respondents reported regularly playing truant (Williams *et al.*, 2012a) and being temporarily or permanently excluded from school; however these were significantly higher for young adults.

Table 4. SPCR Sample 1: Childhood experiences, by age group

Childhood experiences	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Ever been in care	20	25	24
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,255	1,428
Ever experienced abuse*	17	30	29
<i>Base size</i>	172	1,253	1,425
Ever observed violence in the home	38	41	41
<i>Base size</i>	172	1,254	1,426
Regularly played truant from school*	72	57	59
<i>Base size</i>	172	1,253	1,425
Temporarily excluded from school*	80	61	63
<i>Base size</i>	172	1,251	1,423
Permanently expelled from school*	58	40	42
<i>Base size</i>	172	1,254	1,426
Family member found guilty of a non-motoring criminal offence	44	36	37
<i>Base size</i>	171	1,235	1,406

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Young adults in custody were less likely than older prisoners to report having any children before entering custody (19% compared with 59%). Possibly reflecting this, young adults were less likely than older prisoners to report needing help for a problem concerning children and family (7% compared with 15%), and to state that 'seeing my children' will be important in stopping them from re-offending in the future (16% compared with 39%).

¹³ This is similar to 2013 prison reception statistics, which show that a higher proportion of young adults were sentenced to between 12 months and four years compared with older prisoners (see Table 1).

However looking only at prisoners *who had children*, there were no significant differences between the age groups. There was also no difference in the proportion of young adults (compared with older adults) who stated that the support of their family would be important in stopping them from re-offending (43% compared with 39%).

Employment, training and education

SPCR respondents were asked whether they held any qualifications (see Hopkins, 2012). Half (50%) of young adults reported that they did not have any qualifications, and there was no significant difference when compared with older adults (47%). This is lower than the working age population in the UK holding no qualifications (15%; Office for National Statistics, 2003). When asked what was their highest level of qualification, the most commonly reported qualification among young adults was GCSEs¹⁴ (or equivalent) grade D–G (50% of those with a qualification), then GCSEs (or equivalent) grade A*–C (38%). There were few differences between the age groups. Older prisoners were more likely than young adults to report having a trade apprenticeship (10% compared with 1%), and young adults were more likely to report having GCSEs or equivalent, grade D–G (50% compared with 32%) (Table 5).

Table 5. SPCR Sample 1: Qualifications, by age group

Qualifications, by age group	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Had qualifications	50	53	53
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,255	1,428
Highest qualifications obtained by age group, for those with qualifications (multiple response possible)			
Higher degree/postgraduate qualifications	0	2	1
First degree or equivalent	0	5	4
Diplomas or other higher education equivalent	1	3	3
A/AS levels or equivalent	10	16	15
Trade apprenticeships*	1	10	9
O-levels/GCSEs or equivalent, grades A–C	38	42	41
O-levels/GCSEs or equivalent, grades D–G*	50	32	34
Other qualifications, including overseas	10	7	8
<i>Base size</i>	87	666	752

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Around half (51%) of young adults reported needing help to improve their education, and they were more likely than those aged 21 and over to report this (39%). However their likelihood of saying they needed help to improve work-related skills and literacy and numeracy skills (42% and 24%, respectively) were similar to that for older prisoners (39% and 20%).

Just over a third (38%) of young adults reported being in employment in the four weeks before custody. There was no significant difference when compared with those aged 21 and over (Table 6). Sixty-four per cent of 18–20 year olds, and 50% of older adults reported having been employed at some point in the year (including the four weeks) before custody. This is lower than the UK general employment rate, which was 75% in 2006 for those of working age (Office for National Statistics, 2006).

Among the 62% of young adults who were unemployed in the four weeks before custody, most (62%) reported being unemployed and looking for work. This is significantly higher than the 35% of prisoners aged 21+ who were unemployed during this period. Young adults were also more likely to be in full-time education (6% compared with 1%) or ‘hanging about with friends’ (6% compared with 2%), while older prisoners were more likely to report being permanently unable to work because of long-term sickness or disability (22% compared with 4%).

Table 6. SPCR Sample 1: Employment/activity in the four weeks before custody, by age group

Employment/activity in the four weeks before custody	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Worked in the four weeks before custody	38	31	32
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,261	1,435
Activity before custody, for those not in employment in the four weeks before custody			
Unemployed and looking for work or training*	62	35	38
Unemployed but not looking for work or training	10	18	17
In full-time education*	6	1	1
Hanging about/with friends/family/leisure activities*	6	2	2
Permanently unable to work because of long-term sickness or disability*	4	22	20
Other	12	22	21
<i>Base size</i>	106	864	970

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

¹⁴ General Certificate for School Education – usually taken by 16 year olds in England and Wales.

Around half of young adults (51%) stated that they would need help finding a job when released, which was not significantly different from older prisoners (47%). Young adults were more likely than prisoners aged 21 and over to state that having a job when released will stop them from offending (81% compared with 66%).

When asked about whether they were claiming any benefits in the 12 months before custody, 57% of 18–20 year old prisoners stated that they were (this was not significantly different from prisoners aged 21 and over). There were variations in the types of benefits claimed. Young adults were more likely to report claiming Jobseeker’s Allowance/unemployment benefit compared with older prisoners (49% compared with 34%), and less likely to claim sickness/incapacity benefit, income support and Council Tax benefit (see Table 7).

Table 7. SPCR Sample 1: Types of benefits claimed in the 12 months before custody, by age group (multiple answers possible)

Benefit type	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Any type of benefits	57	65	64
Base size	174	1257	1,431
Jobseeker’s/unemployment benefit*	49	34	36
Income support*	8	20	19
Housing benefit	6	13	12
Council Tax *	3	9	8
Sickness/incapacity benefit*	2	17	15
Other	3	4	4
Don’t know	0	< 1	< 1
Base size (responses)	123	1218	1341

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Accommodation

Prisoners were asked about their accommodation arrangements before custody (see Williams *et al.*, 2012b).

Table 8. SPCR Sample 1: Accommodation before custody, by age group

Accommodation type	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Paying board in a house or flat owned by someone else*	21	10	11
Paying board in a house or flat rented by someone else*	19	7	8
In a house or flat that you or your partner rented*	18	37	34
Living rent-free in a house or flat rented or owned by someone else	16	12	12
In a house or flat that you or your partner owned	9	12	11
Homeless/sleeping rough	6	9	9
Homeless/temporary accommodation	3	7	7
Living with family member	6	3	3
In a house or flat that you or your partner part-owned part-rented	1	3	2
Other	< 1	2	1
Base size	174	1,260	1,434

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

The 18–20 year olds were more likely than prisoners aged 21 and over to report: paying board in a house or flat owned by someone else (21% compared with 10%); and paying board in a house or flat rented by someone else (19% compared with 7%) (Table 8). They were less likely to report living in a house they or their partner rented (18% compared with 37%). Just under 1 in 10 (9%) young adult prisoners reported having been homeless, i.e. sleeping rough or living in temporary accommodation before custody. This was not statistically significantly different from the figure for older adults.

Respondents who had not been in temporary accommodation were asked whether they expected to go back to the same accommodation on release. Most young adults (78%) stated that they expected to return to the same accommodation on release compared with 64% of those aged 21 and over. Consequently, fewer 18–20 year olds stated that they needed help with finding a place to live when released (23% compared with 39%).

Health/mental health

Young adults entering custody were less likely than prisoners aged 21 and over to report needing help with a medical problem (10% compared with 20%), and less likely to report having received treatment or counselling for any health or medical problem in the 12 months before custody (30% compared with 44%).

Young adults were less likely to be considered disabled (18%) compared with prisoners aged 21

and over (38%). General population estimates of disability range from around one in five (19%) (ONS, 2007) in 2005/06¹⁵ to one in four (26%)¹⁶ (Howe, 2010). Young adults were also less likely to be assessed as suffering from both anxiety and depression than older prisoners (15% compared with 27%).¹⁷

In these interviews, conducted at the start of their sentence, 16% of young adults reported *ever* having attempted suicide (this was not statistically significantly different from the figure for older adult prisoners, 25%). This is higher than the general population figure of 6%.¹⁸ There was also no significant difference in whether young adults had *ever* self-harmed without the intention of killing themselves (12%, compared with 15% for older adults). This was higher than the general population, where 5% have been reported to have ever engaged in self-harm.¹⁹ Official statistics are routinely published on the rates of self-harm in custody.²⁰

Substance misuse

Young adults were less likely to report needing help with a drug problem than older prisoners (15% compared with 33%). Eighty-eight per cent of young adults stated that they had ever taken drugs, and this was not significantly different from older adult prisoners (80%). Among those who had taken drugs, young adults were less likely to report ever having overdosed on drugs (15% compared with 29%). It is likely that some of this may be explained by the fact that 'ever' is a shorter period overall for young adults than for the older age group.

Most SPCR respondents stated that they had used drugs in the year (71%) and four weeks before custody (64%) (see Light *et al.*, 2013). Young adults and older prisoners were equally likely to have used any drugs in these time frames (Table 8). This contrasts with general population findings on drug

use. For instance, the Crime Survey for England and Wales (CSEW) found that 8.8% of adults overall reported having taken drugs in the last year, compared with 18.9% of young adults (aged 16–24). This highlights the much higher rates of substance misuse by the offender population regardless of age.²¹

Nonetheless, there were differing patterns in terms of the types of drugs used (Tables 9 and 10). For instance, young adults were significantly more likely to report having used cannabis, cocaine, LSD or ecstasy in the year before custody, whereas older adult prisoners were more likely to report having used crack cocaine, heroin and unprescribed tranquillizers and unprescribed methadone.

Table 9. SPCR prisoners reported drug use in the year before custody by age category (multiple answers possible)

Drug type	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Cannabis*	66	53	55
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
Cocaine*	36	24	25
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
Ecstasy*	25	13	14
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
Amphetamines	18	15	15
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,258	1,431
Crack cocaine*	17	36	34
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
Heroin*	10	37	34
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
LSD*	9	2	3
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
Unprescribed tranquillizers*	9	20	18
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,257	1,432
Unprescribed methadone*	4	12	11
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,258	1,432

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Looking at the average age SPCR respondents reported first taking the various drugs, cannabis, LSD and amphetamines were first used at a younger age (medians 14, 16 and 16, respectively) than other drugs. Ecstasy had a median age of 17, cocaine and unprescribed tranquillizers 18, heroin 20, and unprescribed methadone and crack cocaine

¹⁵ Family Resources Survey. The Family Resources Survey 2009/10 reported a figure of 14%, whilst the Annual Population Survey 2009/10 (www.nomisweb.co.uk) reported 19% of the working age (16–64) general population.

¹⁶ Life Opportunities Survey.

¹⁷ The prevalence of disability was estimated based on analysis of responses to questions about disability and health, and answers to a validated mental health scale which detects levels of anxiety and depression. See Cuniffe *et al.* (2012) for full details on the methods used to assess the disability status of SPCR participants.

¹⁸ McManus *et al.* (2009).

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ministry of Justice (2014).

²¹ Home Office (2013) *Drug Misuse: Findings from the 2013/14 Crime Survey for England and Wales*, <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/drug-misuse-findings-from-the-2013-to-2014-csew/drug-misuse-findings-from-the-201314-crime-survey-for-england-and-wales>

21. This may explain some of the variation in the types of drugs used by the different age groups.

Overall, young adults were less likely to report having used a Class A drug in the four weeks before custody, compared with prisoners aged over 21 (Table 9). There were no significant differences in their likelihood of reporting having used Class B/C drugs in these periods.

Table 10. SPCR prisoners reported drug by class

Drug type/time period	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Class A ever	58	65	64
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,261	1,435
Class A year before custody	45	54	53
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,261	1,435
Class A four weeks before custody*	31	47	45
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,259	1,432
Class B/C ever	83	73	74
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,261	1,435
Class B/C year before custody	68	59	60
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,261	1,435
Class B/C four weeks before custody	56	52	52
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,261	1,435

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Respondents who reported ever having taken drugs were asked about links between their offending behaviour in the year before custody and drug use (Table 11) (and see Light *et al.*, 2013). Just under half (48%) of young adults stated that they had taken drugs when committing offences in the 12 months before custody, which was not statistically different to older adults. Young adults were less likely to state that they committed offences in the year before custody to get money to buy drugs (22%), compared with older adults (43%). Sixteen per cent of young adults compared with 28% of older adults stated that they committed offences to obtain drugs directly. Respondents who reported committing offences in the year before custody were asked whether they had committed these to support someone else's drug use. Young adults were less likely than older prisoners to state that they had – 12% compared with 24%.

A quarter (25%) of young adults stated that their offending was 'a lot' or 'always' connected with their drug use compared with 47% of older prisoners.

Table 11. SPCR Sample 1: Offending in last 12 months and connection with drug or alcohol use, by age group

Whether offending connected to drug or alcohol use	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Whether had taken drugs when committed offence(s)	48	57	56
<i>Base size</i>	149	1,001	1,150
Whether committed offence(s) to get money to buy drugs*	22	43	41
<i>Base size</i>	149	1,001	1,150
Whether committed offence(s) to obtain drugs directly*	16	28	26
<i>Base size</i>	148	994	1,142
Whether committed offence(s) to support drug use of someone else*	12	24	22
<i>Base size</i>	136	897	1,033
Offending a lot or always connected with drug use*	25	47	44
<i>Base size</i>	150	998	1,148
Whether had drunk alcohol when committed offence(s)	64	54	58
<i>Base size</i>	152	965	1,117
Offending a lot or always connected with alcohol use*	41	30	32
<i>Base size</i>	151	960	1,111

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

In contrast, young adults were more likely to link their offending with alcohol use. Young adults who had drunk alcohol in the year before custody were more likely to state that their offending was 'a lot' or 'always' connected with their alcohol use (41% compared with 30%), and also more likely to say that not drinking too much alcohol will stop them from offending in the future (47% compared with 32%).

However, there was no difference between young adults and older prisoners in terms of whether they felt they needed help for an alcohol problem (15%).

Looking in more detail at patterns of use, young adults were more likely than older prisoners to state that they had drunk alcohol in the 12 months before entering custody (87% compared with 77%). Seventy-two per cent of young adults reported having drunk alcohol in the four weeks before custody, which was not significantly different from older prisoners (66%) (Table 12).

Young adults who had drunk alcohol in the four weeks before custody reporting drinking on an average of 12 days (median) across the four weeks. On those days, the median number of units consumed was 14 – demonstrating high levels of alcohol misuse, this figure being higher than the maximum number of units

recommended as safe by the National Health Service (NHS) (3–4 units a day for men, 2–3 units for women).²² There was no significant difference from older prisoners in the median number of days or units.

Table 12. SPCR Sample 1: Alcohol use before custody, by age group

Alcohol use and binge drinking	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Drank alcohol in the 12 months before custody*	87	77	78
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,259	1,433
Drank alcohol in the four weeks before custody	72	66	67
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,259	1,433
Considered to be binge drinkers	49	41	42
<i>Base size</i>	170	1,233	1,403
No alcohol in four weeks before custody	28	34	33
Occasional drinkers	12	10	10
Weekly drinkers	42	35	36
Daily drinkers	18	22	22
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,256	1,429

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Binge drinking is defined by the NHS as more than double the daily unit guidelines for alcohol in one session (8 units for men, 6 units for women).²³ Using this measure, 63% of those who stated that they had drunk alcohol in the four weeks before custody (Light *et al.*, 2013) (42% of the entire sample) were assessed as binge drinkers. There were no significant differences for whether young adults were assessed as binge drinkers, compared with older adult prisoners.²⁴

Those who had consumed alcohol in the four weeks before custody were classified as either occasional (1–3 days), weekly (4–17 days) or daily (> 28 days) drinkers. A third of the overall sample had not drunk alcohol in the four weeks before custody, 10% were considered occasional drinkers, 36% weekly drinkers and 22% daily drinkers. While there was some variation between different age groups, these were not statistically significant.

²² <http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/alcohol-units.aspx>

²³ NHS choices

<http://www.nhs.uk/Livewell/alcohol/Pages/Bingedrinking.aspx>

²⁴ The Health Survey for England finds that young adults in the general population are more likely than adults overall to drink above recommended limits. Young adults are classified as 16–24 year olds. <http://www.hscic.gov.uk/catalogue/PUB13218/HSE2012-Ch6-Alc-cons.pdf>

Experiences on entry to prison

Prisoners were asked about their experiences and feelings on entry to prison (Table 13).

Table 13. SPCR Sample 1: Experiences on entry to prison, by age group

Experiences on entry to prison – strongly agreeing and agreeing with statements	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
When I first came into this prison I felt looked after	51	50	50
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,258	1,432
When I first came into this prison I felt worried and confused	53	48	48
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,260	1,434
In the first few days in this prison staff treated me as an individual	60	54	54
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,257	1,430
I felt extremely alone during my first days in this prison	47	43	43
<i>Base size</i>	174	1,260	1,434
The induction process in this prison helped me know what to expect in the daily regime and when it would happen	64	55	56
<i>Base size</i>	173	1,229	1,402

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

Approximately half of young adults reported feeling worried and confused on entry to prison (53%) and feeling extremely alone during their first days in the prison (47%). Half (51%) reported feeling looked after on entry to prison. Almost two-thirds (64%) reported that the induction process helped them know what to expect in the daily regime, and 60% reported that in the first few days the prison staff treated them as an individual.

There were no significant differences between young adults and prisoners aged 21 and over in their responses to questions on experiences on entry to custody. However, responses varied according to whether respondents reported having previously been sentenced to imprisonment. Young adults who had never been previously sentenced to imprisonment were more likely than those who had been imprisoned previously to report feeling worried and confused on entry to prison (68% compared with 34%). For prisoners aged 21 and over, this was 73% compared with 39%. Prisoners aged 21 and over who had never previously been sentenced to imprisonment were also more likely to agree that they felt extremely alone on entry to prison (53% compared with 39%). They were also more likely to report that they felt looked after on entry to prison (60% compared with 47%). There was no significant difference for young adults in response to this question.

Re-offending

SPCR young adults in custody were equally likely to re-offend in the 12 months after release as their older counterparts (53%). However, the 2011 MoJ proven re-offending cohort statistics (England and Wales) for those sentenced to up to four years in prison show a different pattern, with those aged 18–20 more likely to commit at least one proven re-offence within one year of release compared to older prisoners (56% compared to 47%)²⁵ (Ministry of Justice, 2013c) (Table 14). The difference between the SPCR survey figures and the official statistics is likely to be due to the smaller survey sample and changes in re-offending rates over time.

Table 14. Re-offending in the year after release by age

Re-offending	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Overall (%)
SPCR sample	53	54	54
Base size	166	1,165	1,331
2011 re-offending cohort	56	47	48
Base size	6,949	47,073	54,022

SPCR respondents were asked about what factors they felt would be important in stopping them from re-offending in the future (Table 15).

Table 15. SPCR Sample 1: Factors reported as important in stopping re-offending, by age group (multiple responses possible)

Which of these will be important in stopping you from re-offending in the future?	18–20 (%)	21+ (%)	Total (%)
Having a job*	81	66	68
Having a place to live	55	61	60
Avoiding certain people	55	46	47
Having enough money to support myself	53	51	51
Not drinking too much alcohol*	47	32	34
Fear of returning to prison	43	42	42
Getting support from my family	43	39	40
Not using drugs	38	47	46
Getting support from my friends	33	26	27
Seeing my children*	16	39	36
Having treatment or support for drug or alcohol problems*	15	28	27
Having access to health care	8	14	14
Something else	6	7	7
None of these	3	5	5
Base size	174	1,261	1,435

*Denotes statistical significance at $p < 0.01$.

For each age group, the most frequently reported factor that would be important in stopping them from re-offending was 'having a job'. Around four-fifths of young adults (81%) stated that this would be important, compared with approximately two-thirds of those aged 21 and over (66%). Young adults were more likely than older prisoners to report 'not drinking too much alcohol' (47% compared with 32%) as an important factor in stopping them from re-offending. On the other hand, they were less likely than older prisoners to report 'having treatment and support for a drug and/or alcohol problem' (15% compared with 28%) and 'seeing my children' (16% compared with 39%) as important factors.

Implications

The findings here indicate that young adults in custody are similar to older prisoners in a number of respects, with both groups demonstrating high levels of need in terms of employment, education and substance misuse problems.

However, within these needs there were important differences. For instance, although similar proportions reported being unemployed during the four weeks before custody, the majority of young adult prisoners were unemployed and looking for work during this period, while older adults were more likely than young adults to describe themselves as permanently unable to work due to sickness or disability. This, plus the low levels of educational attainment among young adults, indicates the importance of improving education and employability among this group.

The results demonstrate that drugs are a problem among prisoners, regardless of age, in contrast to general population figures (although older prisoners who had used drugs were more likely to link their offending with their drug use). They also show that older adult prisoners were more likely to have taken Class A drugs before custody. This suggests that older adults and young adult drug users may require different types of intervention focused on their particular patterns of drug use.

Compared with older prisoners, there were no statistically significant differences in terms of the frequency of drinking and whether they were considered to be binge drinkers. However, young adults were more likely to link their offending behaviour with alcohol, and to state that not drinking

²⁵ Further breakdown of proven reoffending statistics; those sentenced to up to four years only (MoJ, October 2013).

too much alcohol will help stop them from re-offending in the future. Links between drinking, age and crime have been demonstrated in other research,²⁶ and the role of alcohol misuse in offending behaviour should be considered in the rehabilitation of young adults.

In interpreting these results, it is important to consider that young adults in custody are different from older prisoners because of their age alone, and therefore may have been less likely to experience certain life events.

The fact that a higher proportion of young adults were serving their first period in custody, and custody itself will have different impacts on young adults than it will on older adults – for instance in disrupting education, which may restrict achievement and make it hard to find employment on release – should also be considered in ensuring appropriate programmes and interventions to support desistance.

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²⁶ Richardson, A. and Budd, T. (2003); Matthews, S. and Richardson, A. (2005).