

Youth justice in a changing international landscape

Trends, evidence and promising approaches

Evidence Seminar 21 May 2026

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Why this matters now

- Youth justice is changing internationally
- Systems face greater scrutiny and lower tolerance of harm
- Outcome expectations are increasing
- Evidence, politics and public debate often diverge



International contexts

COVID system disruption

- COVID disrupted the whole youth justice pathway
- Sharp falls in contact concealed system strain
- Court delays increased remand and uncertainty
- Services, schooling and family contact were interrupted
- Workforce pressures became more visible

18:00	LONDON (LHR)	16:00	CANCELED
18:04	GLASGOW (GLA)	16:00	CANCELED
17:49	BRUSSELS (BRU)	16:37	CANCELED
18:04	MUNICH (MUC)	16:37	CANCELED
18:29	LOS ANGELES (LAX)	18:42	CANCELED
23:56	NEW YORK CITY (EWR)	21:35	CANCELED
24:04	TORONTO (YYZ)	04:33	CANCELED
13:45	PARIS (CDG)	06:10	CANCELED
14:12	TOKYO (HND)	06:53	CANCELED
13:54	MADRID (MAD)	07:03	CANCELED
14:32	MELBOURNE (MEL)	07:53	CANCELED
18:44	BARCELONA (BCN)	09:09	CANCELED
19:33	DUBAI (DXB)	10:28	CANCELED
12:73	OSLO (OSL)	11:21	CANCELED
4:79	ZURICH (ZRH)	11:37	CANCELED
7:46	LONDON (LCY)		CANCELED
9:34	GLASGOW (GLA)		CANCELED
3:49	BRUSSELS (BRU)		CANCELED
1:94			CANCELED
5:29			CANCELED

‘Earlier’ youth justice system approaches

MODEL	BASIC FEATURES	COUNTRIES
Welfare	Focus on needs of dependent child, unified care/criminal jurisdiction, diagnosis and treatment, informal procedures, and indeterminate sentences	Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, Japan, USA (pre-1960s)
Justice	Accountability, focus on deeds of responsible agent, just deserts, criminal jurisdiction, procedural formality, and punishment	USA (post-1960s)
Minimal intervention	Avoidance of ‘net-widening’, diversion from criminal proceedings, decarceration, and community alternatives	Scotland
Restorative justice	Focus on accountability and reintegration, reparation and mediation for victims, diversion, and de-carceration	New Zealand
Neo- correctionalist	Responsibility of parents and children, early intervention and prevention, accountability to victim, reparation, systems management, and focus on effectiveness	England and Wales

Adapted from Cavadino, M., & Dignan, J. (2007). *The penal system: An introduction (4th ed.)*. SAGE.

Contemporary approaches, uneven evidence

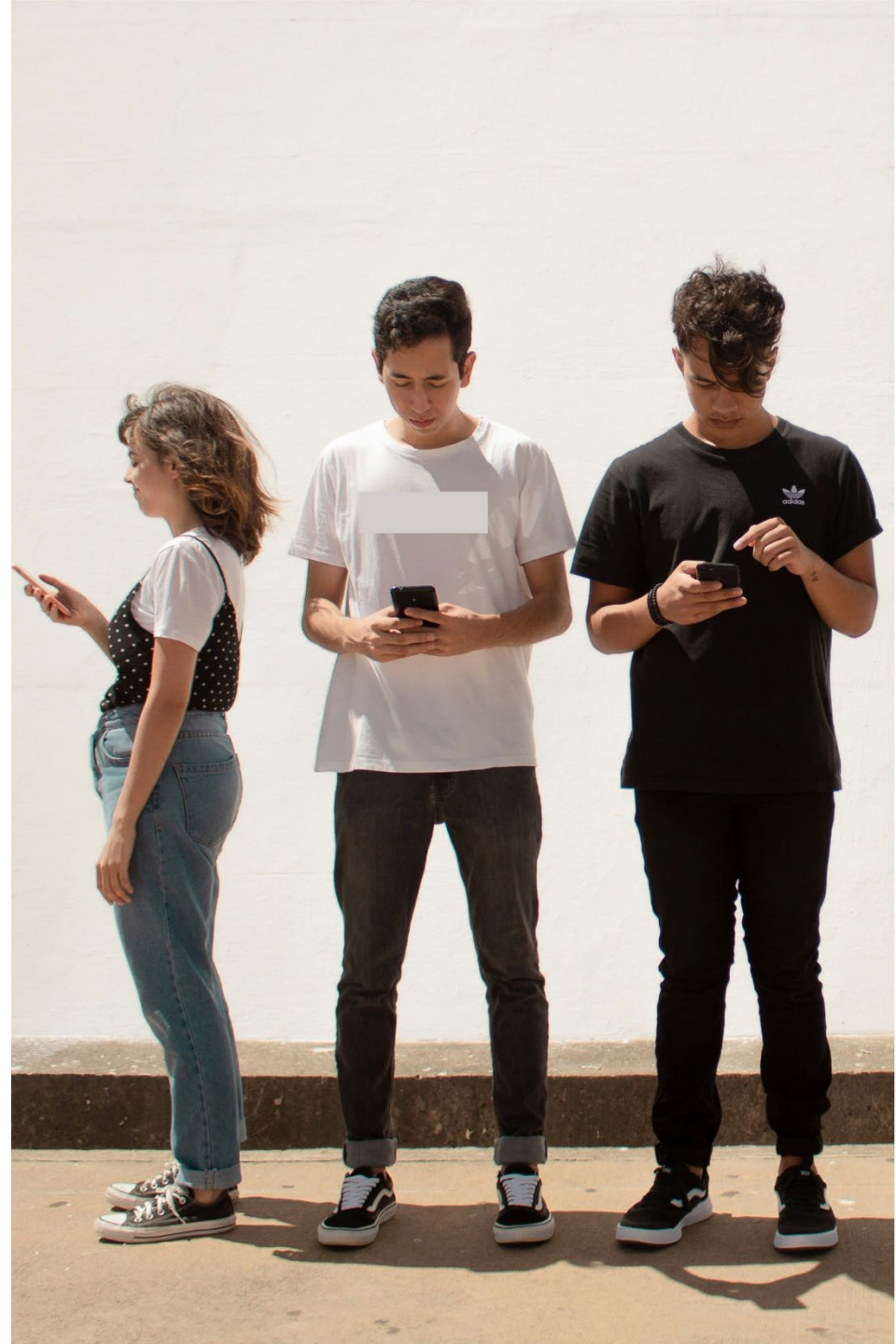
- Multiple youth justice models operate in parallel. However, shared language does not always mean shared approaches
- Developmental, trauma-informed, rights-based and risk-management logics coexist
- Evidence and statistics are often limited, delayed or fragmented
- Media and political narratives can fill the gaps



International trends

Fewer youths entering the system

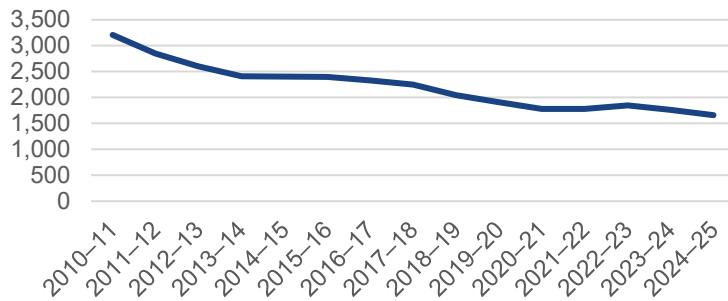
- Long-term decline in youth offending (Oberwittler & Svensson, 2025)
- Greater use of diversion
- Less adolescent risk-taking and offending less “normalised” (Ball et al., 2023)



Youth offender downwards trajectories

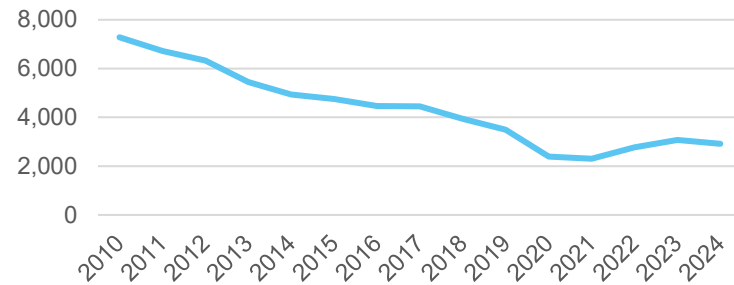
Australia

Youth proceeded against by police
(rate per 100,000, aged 10-17)



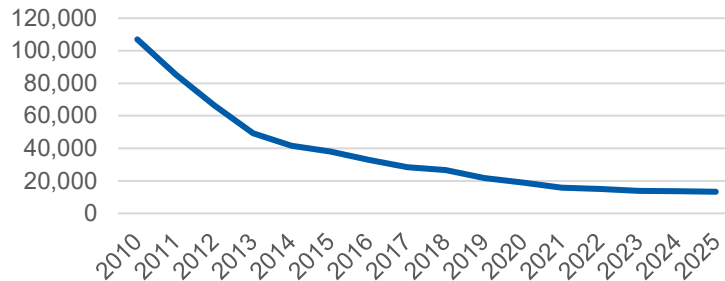
Canada

Youth accused by police
(rate per 100,000, aged 12-17)



England & Wales

Children cautioned or sentenced
(aged 10-17)



(Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, 2025; Department of Justice Canada, 2024; Youth Justice Board for England and Wales, 2025).

Smaller cohorts, concentrated complexity

- High levels of trauma, neurodisability, FASD, mental health needs and substance-use concern (Beaudry et al., 2021; Bower et al., 2018; Malvaso et al., 2024)
- Exclusion from family, school, culture, and other protective relationships (Aazami et al., 2023)
- Repeated patterns of offending, exclusion, unmet need and system involvement



Growing international convergence

Strengthened professional and policy consensus

More child-centred, relational and developmental approaches

Most jurisdictions now blend multiple youth justice traditions

but...

**Some exceptions in some
sub-national jurisdictions**

**Political, media & online
contestation**

Youth detention falling; strong remand pressure

- UNICEF (2025) estimates around 67,000 fewer children in detention (including police detention) in 2024 across 120 countries, than in 2018
- Substantial long-term reductions in the UK, US and elsewhere
- Number of girls has also fallen; gender-specific needs easier to overlook (Burns & Riley, 2025)
- Remand now dominates many detention populations
- More short-stays and greater population instability

Jurisdiction	Year	Average daily remand share
Ireland	2021 2024	39% 41%
England & Wales	2014/05 2024/05	23% 44%
Canada	2017/2018 2021/2022	58% 60%
Australia	2021, Q4 2025, Q4	72% 72%* *excludes NT

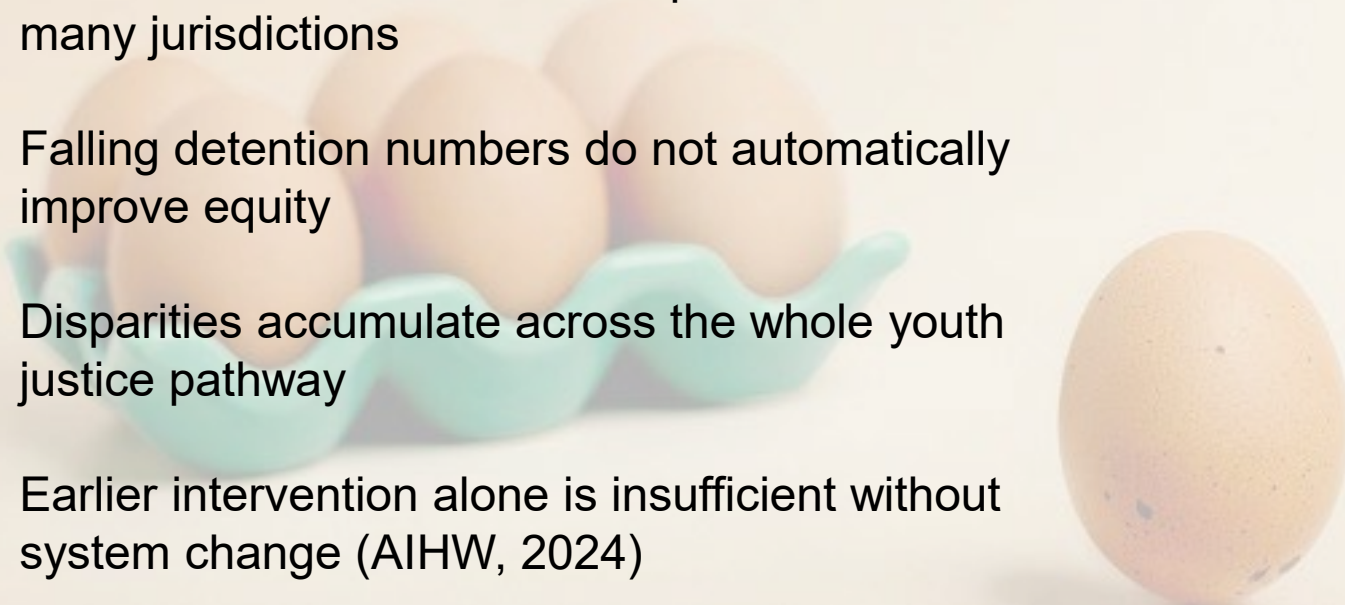
Youth detention models are changing

- Shifts from large prison-like facilities to smaller and more local models
- Some fully professional workforces
- Homelike and therapeutic ambitions
- Alternative semi and non-secure residential homes
- More diverse range of providers and some different forms emerging



Disproportionality remains entrenched

- Severe Indigenous over-representation across Australia and Canada
- Persistent racial and ethnic disparities across many jurisdictions
- Falling detention numbers do not automatically improve equity
- Disparities accumulate across the whole youth justice pathway
- Earlier intervention alone is insufficient without system change (AIHW, 2024)



International evidence

Diversion evidence now strongly established

- Recent diversion and incarceration reviews continue to support limiting unnecessary formal justice contact (Ackerman, 2024).
- Police-initiated diversion is supported by a Campbell Collaboration systematic review of 19 high-quality studies, including 13 randomised trials (Wilson et al., 2018).
- The current emphasis is not only diversion, but proportionate diversion: avoiding unnecessary assessment, programming and net-widening (Wilson et al., 2018; Youth Endowment Fund, 2025).



CBT and skills-based approaches: stronger violence-prevention evidence

- Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) remains one of the better-supported intervention approaches for reducing reoffending, especially when focused on problem-solving, self-control and behaviour change (Smith et al., 2024).
- Recent reviews warn that “CBT” is now often used loosely, so fidelity and programme content matter (Smith et al., 2024).
- The evidence is strongest when CBT is structured, skills-focused and matched to the child’s risks and needs.

Family and community: programme implementation matters

- Multisystemic Therapy and Functional Family Therapy remain among the better-known community-based approaches for adolescent antisocial behaviour, but effects vary by outcome and context (Hunkin et al., 2025).
- Multisystemic Therapy is particularly designed to address serious antisocial behaviour across home, school and neighbourhood settings, not only the child's individual behaviour (European Union Drugs Agency, 2017).
- The more recent evidence strengthens the implementation message: model fidelity, workforce skill and local system fit are central, not optional (Hunkin et al., 2025).



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Developmental prevention: stronger long-term evidence

- A recent umbrella review identified risk and protective factors across individual, family, school, peer and neighbourhood domains (Ayano et al., 2024).
- This supports a developmental and ecological approach: youth crime prevention cannot sit only inside the justice system (Ayano et al., 2024).
- The evidence base now supports earlier recognition of risk pathways, but the practical challenge is sustained cross-system response before offending becomes entrenched.



International enablers

Complex cohorts require specialist practice

- Smaller and more concentrated or complex cohorts need higher capability
- Relational and developmental practice is highly skilled work
- Workforce stability and supervision matters
- Youth justice as specialist practitioners

Better pathways require better system alignment

- Many youth are already known to care and protection/OOHC, and/or education, disability, mental health and substance-use services
- ‘Crossover kids’ need active pathway coordination, not sequential referrals
- Fragmented systems create fragmented pathways
- Reintegration and transitions are critical



Child-centred frameworks and tools increasingly shape practice

Frameworks/approaches	Assessment, planning and decision tools
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Models of Care• Children First, Offenders Second• Positive Youth Justice• Trauma-informed practice• Restorative practice / restorative justice• Desistance-informed practice• Developmental / adolescent development framework• Rights-respecting practice• Culturally responsive / Indigenous-led practice frameworks• Secure Care Pathway and Standards (Scotland)• Good Lives Model	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Screening for speech, language, neurodevelopmental, FASD, mental health and substance-use needs• AssetPlus• YLS/CMI 2.0• SAVRY• MAYSI-2• START:AV• DRAI (Detention Risk Assessment Instrument)• Outcomes Star• Case formulation tools• Safety and wellbeing plans• Intervention plans / case plans• Restorative conference preparation tools• Risk–Need–Responsivity (RNR)

Timely information that supports learning

- Delayed official statistics leave a knowledge gap
- Operational visibility needs to be closer to real time
- Emerging risks should be seen earlier
- Practice, lived-experience and operational knowledge should inform adaptation
- Formative evaluation helps new initiatives learn and adapt early



Leadership that can hold the system together

- Maintaining direction and coherence during crises, incidents and political change
- Connecting policy intent, operational systems and frontline practice
- Aligning agencies around children's pathways, needs and outcomes
- Valuing research evidence, practice wisdom and lived experience
- Balancing public, political and operational pressures without losing direction

International conclusions

- Youth justice still adjusting after COVID
- Fewer children entering formal systems
- Smaller cohorts with greater complexity
- Child-first approaches gaining influence
- Remand and disproportionality remain unresolved
- Knowing what helps children is necessary but not sufficient



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Audience questions



**ORANGA
TAMARIKI**
Ministry for Children



RESEARCH CENTRE FOR
Better Outcomes
FROM FOSTERING AND RESIDENTIAL CARE