



COUNTRY COMPARISON

SYNTHESIS

Young Adults (18–25) in detention

INTRODUCTION

This report of findings presents and analyses the key insights from a small comparative study on how **six European countries** deal with young adults (aged 18–25) within their detention and sanctions systems.

The analysis is based on the provided country comparison matrix, covering a.o. legislation, facility types, financing, demographics, programmes, and staffing.

The purpose of this report is to identify general patterns, differences, and structural challenges, with particular attention to development-oriented approaches, alternatives to detention, and the position of young adults at the intersection of youth and adult criminal justice.



Legal Framework and Positioning of Young Adults

A central finding is that **none** of the countries examined has a **uniform, comprehensive legal framework** designed exclusively for the full **18–25 age group**. Most systems apply a strict legal boundary at the age of 18, after which individuals fall under adult criminal law. The Netherlands is the notable exception: through its Adolescent Criminal Law (Adolescentenstrafrecht, ASR), it provides an explicit legal mechanism allowing juvenile criminal law to be applied flexibly to young adults up to the age of 23, based on developmental considerations and the circumstances of the offence. Internationally, this represents a distinctive and explicitly development-oriented approach.

In contrast, countries such as Belgium, Austria, Norway, Switzerland, and Spain generally place young adults in the adult criminal justice system. Any age-specific exceptions are limited and narrowly defined. Switzerland, for instance, includes Article 61 of the Swiss Criminal Code, a specific custodial measure for offenders under 25 with serious developmental or personality disorders, but this applies only to a small, clearly circumscribed subgroup. In Austria, young adults aged 18–20 are recognised as a distinct category in sentencing law, yet there is no dedicated detention regime for them. Overall, young adults remain largely legally 'invisible' as a separate category within detention law.



Adult criminal law

Adult criminal law constitutes the default pathway for young adults among almost all countries studied. There are generally no active or systematic mechanisms to divert individuals over 18 back into juvenile or pedagogically oriented justice pathways. Where developmental factors are taken into account—as in Norway or Switzerland—this typically occurs at the level of sentence execution rather than legal qualification. As a result, the transition from youth to adult criminal justice represents a sharp institutional break, occurring precisely during a life phase characterised by ongoing neurological, psychological, and social development.



Types of facilities and scales

Significant differences emerge with regard to the types of facilities in which young adults are detained. Traditional, large-scale prisons dominate in Belgium, Austria, and Spain. At the same time, several countries have developed smaller-scale or semi-open facilities, often oriented towards work, education, and reintegration. Norway and Switzerland stand out for their relatively strong emphasis on small-scale, community-integrated facilities, such as transition houses and semi-detention regimes. However, provision remains fragmented. Only Norway operates a unit explicitly and exclusively designed for the 18–25 age group (the Larvik unit), and its capacity is extremely limited.

In Switzerland and Belgium, a small number of facilities accommodate young adults in practice, but these lack nationwide coverage or firm legal anchoring. Austria operates a single specialised youth detention facility for males, which serves only a limited proportion of the target group. As a result of these constraints, many young adults are placed in regular adult prison units. The Netherlands do have a development towards small scale detention facilities for minors which in combination with the Adolescent Criminal Law applied may be used to detain young adults from 18 to 23 years old.

► Transfers and Progression within Detention

In most countries, movement between facilities is primarily driven by administrative criteria such as availability, security assessments, and sentence length. A structured, development-oriented progression model is largely absent. Norway again represents a partial exception, with a formal progression pathway from high-security detention to open facilities, transition housing, and, in some cases, electronic monitoring. At the same time, this system can be unstable for young adults: relatively minor behavioural incidents may in this case result in rapid regression to more restrictive regimes.

In Switzerland and Austria, formal opportunities exist to move to less restrictive regimes, but access is heavily dependent on employment, education, and regional capacity. These eligibility conditions often exclude precisely those young adults who experience the greatest instability in housing, education, and work.

In the Netherlands a strong development towards forensic provisions at the end of detention like Exodus houses (20 to 30 in the country) and the House of Restoration in Almelo tend to open ways from a forensic care perspective for a pathway from close to semi open or open facilities.

► Financing and Governance

Financing arrangements vary widely and have a direct impact on the availability and quality of provision. The Netherlands and Belgium operate mixed funding models in which detention is financed nationally, while care and support—particularly under juvenile criminal law—are funded at local or regional level. This division frequently generates friction, uncertainty, and reluctance among judges to impose development-oriented measures.

Austria applies a centrally funded, fully public model under the Ministry of Justice, but with limited resources for specialised youth-oriented care. Switzerland's system is highly decentralised at cantonal level, resulting in substantial differences in availability, capacity, and access to facilities and programmes. Norway applies, although detention facilities are nationally funded, the so-called "import model", under which regular public services (healthcare, education, labour and welfare services) remain responsible for providing services inside detention. While this supports continuity and integration, it depends heavily on effective inter-agency cooperation.

Profile and Vulnerabilities of Young Adults (18-25)

Across all countries, a broadly consistent profile of detained young adults emerges: multiple and intersecting vulnerabilities are the norm rather than the exception. Many young adults in detention experience mental health problems, substance use disorders, traumatic childhood experiences, low educational attainment, and unstable housing. Socio-economic disadvantage is strongly overrepresented, as are males and individuals with a migration background.

At the same time, a key finding is the widespread lack of disaggregated data for the 18–25 age group. In many systems, statistics distinguish only between ‘juveniles’ and ‘adults’, obscuring the size, characteristics, and specific needs of young adults and limiting evidence-based policy development.

Gender Dimension

The situation of young women requires specific attention. Young women form a very small minority within detention systems and are therefore usually housed in general women’s units without age-specific provision. None of the countries studied has dedicated facilities or comprehensive programmes tailored to young women aged 18–25. Their particular vulnerabilities—such as high prevalence of trauma, mental health problems, and caregiving responsibilities—are rarely addressed in a systematic manner. Here too, the lack of age- and gender-disaggregated data contributes to policy invisibility.



Programmes, Daily Life, and Restorative Approaches

Education, work, and treatment are formally recognised as key objectives of detention in all countries, but availability and quality vary considerably. Small-scale facilities generally offer better access to external work and education, whereas programme provision in large-scale prisons is often limited and disrupted by short lengths of stay and staffing shortages. Only a few countries have embedded restorative approaches within detention practice.

The Netherlands and to some extent Belgium stand out for their relatively extensive use of restorative justice, restorative practices in detention facilities, mediation, and family-oriented initiatives. Norway stands out for its standardization of restorative justice and restorative sanctioning for all young offenders under 18 years old, while the difference with 18 to 25 again being sentenced to prison is striking.



Staff: Training and Professional Orientation

None of the countries examined requires mandatory, age-specific training for staff working with young adults. Norway stands out for its high level 'academic' teaching and education of prison personnel. Generally, training programmes are largely generalist and focus on security, control, and order. Pedagogical and relational competencies are structurally embedded mainly in youth institutions, but tend to disappear when young adults are placed in adult facilities. Staff shortages—particularly pronounced in Austria, Belgium, and the Netherlands—further undermine continuity, programme availability, and the quality of guidance and support.

CONCLUSION

Overall, this comparison shows that **young adults in detention occupy a structural 'in-between' position:** neither fully treated as juveniles nor explicitly addressed as a distinct group within adult systems while being 'in transition' at the age of 18 to 25 years old. While several promising and innovative practices exist—most notably the Adolescent Criminal Law in The Netherlands and Norway's emphasis on small-scale facilities—there is no coherent, legally embedded, and data-informed policy framework for the 18–25 age group.

Future development requires explicit recognition of young adults as a distinct target group in transition, improved data collection, expanded investment in small-scale and development-oriented provision, and targeted training for staff. Only under these conditions can detention for young adults contribute effectively to sustainable reintegration and the prevention of reoffending.

May 4, 2026

The Bridge team

