

Who Holds the Key? Access to Justice as Youth Crime Prevention

There is a moment that repeats itself in many case files I read. A young person, somewhere between seventeen and twenty-five, sits across from an official (a police officer, a prosecutor, a duty lawyer met four minutes earlier) and is asked to make a decision that will shape the next decade of their life. They do not know what a caution is. They do not know that the confession being suggested to them is not the same as the truth. They do not know that a right exists which, in that room, at that hour, nobody is going to mention.

We call what happens next “youth crime.” It would be more accurate to call it what it often is: the moment a young person discovers that the law is something done to them rather than something available for them.

Prevention debates tend to divide into two familiar camps. One argues for more policing, faster charges, harder sentences. The other argues for youth clubs, mentoring, sport, jobs. Both are talking about the same young person, and both are usually talking without them. What neither camp names often enough is whether a young person can actually reach the law when they need it.

Access to justice is the structure of crime prevention.

Consider how the absence of it operates. A young woman experiencing violence at home who does not know that a protection order exists, or knows and cannot afford the application, learns that the state will not intervene. A young man in a neighbourhood where the local authority has quietly stopped enforcing housing standards learns that rules apply downward but not upward. A young person held in pre-trial detention for eleven months, in a facility designed for adults, learns more about criminal organisation in that period than any recruiter could teach them on the outside.

This is where prevention is actually won or lost. Every serious study of pathways into offending points to the same clustering of factors, such as exclusion from education, precarious housing, food insecurity, untreated ill-health, exposure to violence, contact with institutions that are corrupt or indifferent. Each of them corresponds to a right that already exists in binding international law, and each of them, in a functioning system, would generate a claim. Economic, social and cultural rights are about crime prevention, and they are enforceable, but only where anyone can be bothered to enforce them.

The distance between a right that exists on paper and a right a young person can actually use is the space in which violence and crime grow.

Three consequences follow.

First, legal literacy is prevention infrastructure. A generation that knows what a lawyer does, what a complaint mechanism is, what a UN treaty body can and cannot deliver, is a generation with more than one option when it is wronged. This knowledge is currently distributed almost exactly along the lines of wealth. That distribution can be reversed at a cost far lower than incarceration.

Second, institutional integrity is prevention. Where courts are not independent, where police units are captured, where public funds are diverted from the schools and clinics that would have kept a fourteen-year-old occupied and fed, the resulting harm arrives years later wearing the label of youth criminality. It is not. It is the downstream effect of an accountability failure that was somebody's responsibility long before that young person was old enough to be blamed.

Third, the security frame has costs that are paid by the young. Broadly drawn counter-terrorism and public-order powers, applied to protest, to online speech, to association, sweep in exactly the age group this campaign is addressing. A young person prosecuted under an over-extended security law does not become safer, and neither does anyone else. They acquire a suspicion and a permanent scepticism about whether the rule of law was ever meant to include them. Prevention policy that produces that outcome is actually deferral.

None of this argues against constructive work, such as the sport, the mentoring, the community programmes that this initiative rightly champions. It argues that those programmes hold only when they rest on something enforceable. A young person who has been listened to by a coach and ignored by a court has learned two things, and the second one lasts longer.

Our organisation's emblem is a figure holding up a key. It is deliberately not a gavel or a scale, because the point was never the machinery of law. The point is whether the door opens, and for whom. For most young people at risk of violence and crime, the door has been locked for a long time, and nobody has ever explained that a key exists at all.

Ask them. That is what this campaign is for. Then give them the key, and be ready for what they do with it.