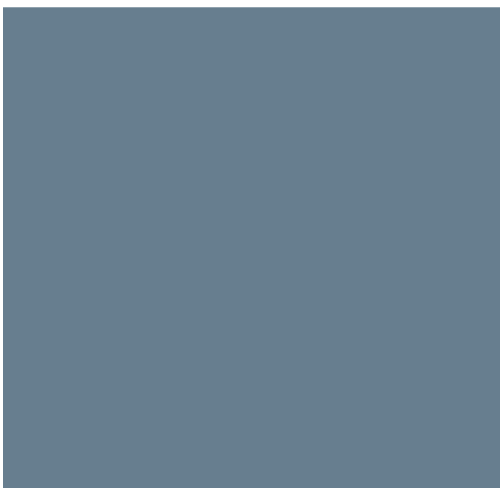


# Listening to Young Women's Voices II

Conversations with girls who stayed in Burnaby Youth Custody Centre





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Conversations with girls who stayed  
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## YOUTH HEALTH ♦ YOUTH RESEARCH ♦ YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

McCreary Centre Society is a non-government not-for-profit committed to improving youth health through research and youth engagement projects. Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to identify and address the health needs of young people in British Columbia.

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# Introduction

## Background

In 2007, when McCreary Centre Society was first commissioned to conduct a qualitative study of the experiences of young women in custody in BC, there was an average of 19 girls in custody on any given day. At that time, Burnaby Youth Custody Centre provided all-female living units, and Prince George and Victoria housed young women in mixed gender living units.

With females substantially outnumbered by males in the centres, Youth Custody Services senior managers wanted an independent study of young women's experiences. They were particularly interested in the young women's perceptions of safety within the centres and in whether they would prefer gender segregated or mixed living arrangements.

Twenty-three young women with experience of the BC youth custody centres were interviewed. Seventeen were interviewed solely in custody and six were interviewed while they were in custody and again within six months of leaving custody.

At that time, young women praised many individual staff and programs, appreciated the counselling support they received while in custody, and valued the educational programming. Most also believed that the custody centres offered them a respite from alcohol and other drug use, dysfunctional relationships, and abusive situations.

However, they also spoke about the need to develop more community sentencing options, which would reduce the number of young women entering the system for administrative offences. They also described their experiences in mixed gender custody centres. They offered evidence that all-female living units and/or an all-female custody centre in the province would allow young women to serve their sentence in a safer, more positive and more productive learning environment, where they would be

protected from sexual harassment and inappropriate or unsolicited sexual contact by male residents.

The young women who participated in the study felt that if an all-female youth custody centre were developed it should be designed to ensure family and community contact could be maintained. It should also offer more gender-specific services, and educational, recreational, and vocational opportunities. There should also be greater access to female health professionals and more female mentors and role models.

When the results of the study were shared with BC Youth Custody Services, they made some immediate and lasting changes. By June 2008, mixed gender living units had been abolished and all-female living units were created at Victoria and Prince George Youth Custody Centres, with 89% of staff on these units being female. Across all three centres young women had greater access to female doctors and a greater range of gender-specific programming.

Between 2008 and 2012, rates of young women sentenced to custody continued to decline and by 2012 there was an average of 13 female youth in custody at any one time.

The unintended consequence of the reduced number of young women entering custody was that many ended up in isolation because there were no other young women in custody at the centre they were in.

The cost of maintaining female units at each centre was not financially viable, and Youth Custody Services decided to house all female offenders at one centre. The official transfer of all female services to Burnaby Youth Custody Centre was completed in April 2012.

# Current study

McCreary Centre Society was approached by BC Youth Custody Services to conduct a repeat of the 2007 study in order to canvass the experiences of young women following the centralization of services to Burnaby. The aim was to speak to up to 60 young women, some of whom had experienced more than one centre, others who had experienced Burnaby before and after services were centralized, and some who were entering into custody for the first time in Burnaby. This study was completed between July 2012 and April 2014, during which time there was an average of 12 young women in custody on any given day.

Youth were asked about their experiences in Burnaby's all-female environment as well as their experience before, during, and after the centralization of services. The project considered the experiences of young women who had previously served sentences outside the Lower Mainland. Where there were differences between their experiences and those of young women from the Lower Mainland, it is noted in the report.

Key topic areas include transportation to the centre, intake experiences, maintaining contact with family and friends, the separation of male and female youth within the centres, health concerns and services, and transitioning back into the community.

Young women who participated were asked to take part in a follow-up interview at least 60 days after their release from custody. At the follow-up interview, they were asked to reflect back on their experiences in custody and about factors that were successfully buffering them from returning to custody, or circumstances that contributed to their return to custody.

Individual interviews were conducted using a semi-structured format with open-ended questions. The interviews were recorded and later transcribed. Two young women did not provide permission for their interviews to be recorded. In these cases, the interviewer took extensive notes. Participation in the interviews was voluntary, and participants received a small honorarium for taking part each time.

The questions were developed following consultation with Youth Custody Services, Burnaby Youth Custody Centre staff, and the Medical Director for BC Corrections Branch and Youth Custody Services.

Quotes from young women who took part in this project appear throughout the report.



## Participants

Fifty-seven female youth were interviewed at Burnaby Youth Custody Centre. They were aged between 13 and 19, with an average age of 16. At that time, 52 agreed to be re-interviewed following their discharge into the community. However, only 37 could be located.

Those who could not be located did not respond through the contact phone number, email, or Facebook profile information they had provided. Their whereabouts were also unknown to their probation officers, immediate family, residents at their discharge address, or other people they had consented for McCreary to contact. Tragically, one of the young women passed away within 60 days of being released from custody.

Among the 37 young women who were located, seven declined to be interviewed. Another seven initially agreed to be interviewed but did not keep scheduled appointments and subsequently lost contact with McCreary.

The 23 young women who participated in a second interview included seven who had returned to custody after their initial discharge. Interviews took place between 120 days and 21 months after discharge, although most were conducted within nine months of discharge.

## Limitations of the study

The report aimed to capture the perspectives and experiences of 60 young women over an 18 month period. However, data collection had to be extended because so few young women were entering custody who had not already participated in the study during a previous stay at the centre.

In conjunction with Youth Custody Services it was agreed to complete data collection after 22 months when 57 individual young women had been interviewed.

The extended timeline meant that some changes had already been implemented at the centre based on youth's feedback gleaned from other studies, such as McCreary's *Time Out III* survey of male and female youth in custody and McCreary's Next Steps project with youth in custody (see page 8 for more details). This may have led to some of the discrepancies in youth's experiences at the centre, and may mean that their concerns or suggestions were already being acted upon. Where it is known that this occurred, it is noted in the report.

The views and recollections of the young women were accepted at face value, except when there was contradictory evidence (for example, if young women answered "No" to the question "Have you been bullied in custody?" but later described their experiences of being bullied).

**'Young women' or 'female youth' is used to describe females aged 13–19 who took part in the study.**

Only 40% of the young women who took part in a first interview participated in a follow-up interview. This meant that the post-release reflections of the others were not included in this report.

Young women who had returned to custody made up a third of those who completed a follow-up interview. Their return to custody may have made it difficult for them to objectively answer some of the questions about behaviours they engaged in or witnessed in the centre. This was considered during the analyses, and it is noted when their perspective differs from those who completed a follow-up interview in the community.

Some young women were unable to answer some of the questions or declined to do so. As a result, not all information was gathered from all participants.

Prince George Youth Custody Centre continues to accommodate young women for up to seven days to support court appearances. Young women who stayed in Prince George and were not transferred to Burnaby were not included in this study.

### Custody Services' response to the study

A draft of this report was shared with BC Youth Custody Services. As a result of this a number of changes have been made to the services and programs offered to young women who enter custody. These changes are discussed on pages 48–50 in a response provided by Youth Custody Services.

#### ***TIME OUT III: A PROFILE OF BC YOUTH IN CUSTODY***



Download *Time Out III* at  
[www.mcs.bc.ca/youth\\_in\\_custody](http://www.mcs.bc.ca/youth_in_custody)

This report presents the findings of a comprehensive survey of youth in BC custody centres. In all, 114 young people aged 12–19 completed the survey between August 2012 and January 2013. They answered questions about their health, their experiences inside and outside the custody centre, and their expectations for the future.

#### ***VOICES FROM THE INSIDE II: A NEXT STEPS PROJECT WITH YOUTH IN CUSTODY***



Download *Voices from the Inside II* at [www.mcs.bc.ca/custody\\_next\\_steps](http://www.mcs.bc.ca/custody_next_steps)

This Next Steps project returned the results of *Time Out III* to youth in custody in BC. The report shares youth's responses to the findings and their recommendations to improve youth health in custody and in the community.

# Entering custody

## Profile of young women in custody

Fifty-seven young women participated in this study:

46% identified as Aboriginal and 40% were of European heritage. The remainder were Latin/South/Central American, Southeast Asian, East Asian, or did not know their background.



Less than a third of youth (32%) were serving their first sentence, and more than half (54%) had been in custody three or more times. Forty percent had been in custody before services were centralized to Burnaby Youth Custody Centre.



For the majority of youth (72%), their only BC custody centre experience was in Burnaby, but 12% had also stayed at Prince George Youth Custody Centre and 16% had stayed in Victoria.



39% indicated that they were living in the Lower Mainland at the time they entered Burnaby, while 30% were from the Island, 19% from the Interior, and 12% were from the North.

## Thoughts on custodial sentences

At the time of their first interviews, more than a third of the young women saw being sentenced to custody as a positive experience in their life, whereas one in five felt it was negative, around a third had neutral feelings, and the rest had mixed feelings. At the follow-up interviews, fewer youth had neutral feelings about the topic and more reported their experience as positive or negative.

*"I see positives in coming to jail. 'Cause if I didn't come here, I would be doing the exact same things as I have been doing."*

For those who saw positive value in serving a custodial sentence, almost half explained that custody provided them with an opportunity to be substance free and to address their substance use challenges. Other positives that young women took from serving a custodial sentence included appreciating the structure it provided, and the opportunities it afforded for them to catch up on schooling and learn skills which they could use when released.

*"I'm going to try and make a very big change. I was doing coke, and heroin, and ecstasy, but being there was like a detox for me. I did a lot of NA in there. They really helped me."*

*"You can get your First Aid and forklift certificates, Foodsafe, driving licences, and all that stuff. So I've been taking advantage of it."*

Others spoke more generally about their time in custody giving them a *"wake up call"* or being an *"eye opener."* Around one in five reported that serving a custodial sentence had given them motivation to stay out of custody and had acted as a deterrent to future criminal activity.

*"I'm gonna take it for better and not come back 'cause I don't want to be 30 and in Adult. It makes you realize you don't want to do that stuff when you get older and older."*

As in 2007, young women questioned the value of being sent to custody for only a short period of time. They felt that when this occurred they were unable to benefit from programs and the services that custody had to offer, and were not in long enough to reflect and make changes to their lifestyle, relationships, and behaviours in the community.

*"I have gained absolutely nothing positive from being in custody. Every time I go to custody it's only for a couple weeks, so I go in and they can't even get me to school."*

Young women who were serving longer sentences or who were repeatedly sentenced for breach of their probation were concerned about becoming institutionalized and about losing contact with positive peers and supports in their community. They also felt that being housed with others who had engaged in criminal behaviour normalized such behaviours, because residents spent a lot of time talking about their crimes and criminal behaviour in general.

*"Custody has been a pause in my life. The whole world stops and I just sit here and wait. Hasn't really been a positive turning point for me at all."*

“ I don't want to spend the rest of my life in custody and if I continue doing what I'm doing that's where I'll be. ”

## Centralization of services

Young women who had experience of the other custody centres were asked specifically about the centralization of services. When interviewed in custody, youth who had experience of Victoria and/or Prince George felt that the positives that had come from centralizing female custody services to Burnaby included the availability of a greater range of programs and services, and greater sensitivity around strip searches and pat downs.

*“There are more programs here [in Burnaby], like sewing and wood shop.”*

*“[Searches] are better in Burnaby. They put a towel around you and you’re not standing there completely naked. It used to be so degrading [in the other centre].”*

Despite these positives, almost all youth who had experienced Victoria and/or Prince George reported that given the choice they would return to the other centre. The exception was one young woman who noted no preference, stating *“It doesn’t really matter. Bullying is not different between centres.”*

Those who preferred the other centres to Burnaby consistently reported three main reasons. These were geographical location, relationships with staff, and the greater number of residents at Burnaby.

The location of the centre in the Lower Mainland led youth from other parts of the province to feel isolated from family, friends, social workers, and other community supports.

In addition to relationships within their home community, female youth mourned the loss of relationships with staff they had liked at Prince George and Victoria. They reported that it was harder to build positive relationships at the Burnaby centre which had a larger staff team. Participants who had previously been in Victoria appreciated that some staff had transferred to Burnaby, which meant they saw familiar people whom they already trusted, which made the transition easier.

*“Staff in Victoria are family. Here they are acquaintances.”*

A couple of Aboriginal residents commented that there was more racism and discrimination from residents at Burnaby in comparison to their experiences in Prince George. One noted that because she was not as familiar with Burnaby staff as those in Prince George, she did not feel safe approaching them for support. She added, *“I miss home and I actually miss that custody centre [Prince George] and if they opened it, I would probably purposely breach just to go back there.”*

“ I prefer Victoria Custody Centre, but if Burnaby Custody Centre was in Victoria, I would say Burnaby. ”

When Youth Custody Services centralized female services to Burnaby, there was concern that young women who would previously have been housed in Victoria or Prince George would meet gang-involved residents or young women involved in sexual exploitation who would recruit them to stay in the Lower Mainland.

This concern was echoed by some youth who had served a sentence in Prince George or Victoria. They talked about the vulnerability of young women from small towns and being outnumbered by those from big cities in the Lower Mainland. They were particularly concerned about mixing with young women who were involved in gangs or the drug or sex trade. They felt that females in Burnaby had generally done more serious crimes than those from outside the Lower Mainland and found this intimidating.

*“We come here to jail and meet other girls that are down to do crime and stuff, and then they’re like you can come and run over to Vancouver.... The other day this one girl from Vancouver said to this other girl from Prince George, ‘Oh yeah come down here I’ll make you lots of money, you can make like a grand.’ And now this other girl’s like ‘Oh wow, we just have to go hang out.’ This girl doesn’t even know, she’s so naïve. They come down here to the city from the smaller communities and they’re not really aware...They’re trying to rehabilitate us but then they put us on a unit with a bunch of girls, all we hear all day is, ‘Oh I beat this bitch up’ and, ‘Oh I sold this much drugs.’”*

One youth talked about feeling less safe in Burnaby than Prince George because older youth on her unit wanted her to come back to the Lower Mainland when she got released to do drug related activities with them. Another reported she overheard a youth being encouraged to move to Burnaby and felt this was likely an attempt at gang recruitment.

However, this was not a universally held view. A few youth had initially felt intimidated to come to Burnaby because of its reputation among young women who had served sentences at the other centres, but they did not find the Burnaby centre to fit this reputation when they got there. One stated, *“I think it’s all good once you get in here and you get to meet all the girls. But it’s really nerve-wracking until you get here.”*

At the follow-up interviews the majority of young women maintained that they had not witnessed any recruitment to gangs or the sex trade occurring at the centre, although around one in six reported that they had witnessed some level of recruitment ranging from being approached themselves to seeing other young women approached.

*“I don’t think I’ve seen any gang recruitment but a girl came up to me once and asked me if I could help her pimp somebody out. And that’s not going to happen but that’s the only time I’ve ever had anyone mention anything like that.”*

*“Actually yeah, one of them asked me to do that [become a commercial sex worker].”*

None of the young women who participated in a follow-up interview were aware of residents who had not returned to their home community because of recruitment into commercial sexual exploitation, drug use or a gang. Additionally, only two of those who were interviewed a second time had not returned to their home community. The reasons the two had not returned were unrelated to their time in custody.

“ It was more talk about gangs instead of recruitment. ”



## Transportation

Of the 57 young women interviewed in custody, 15 had arrived at Burnaby from Vancouver Island, seven from the North, 12 from the Interior, and the rest from communities across the Lower Mainland.

Those from the Lower Mainland had all been transported to custody by road in a sheriff's van or police car. Experiences were mixed, with some having exclusively female staff accompany them, others having both male and female staff, and some just males. Also, some travelled alone or with other female youth, whereas others shared transportation with adult females and adult males.

Generally, youth who came to the centre from the Lower Mainland had positive experiences with the sheriffs or police who accompanied them, although there were complaints that the sheriff's van was uncomfortably hot in the summer, it was not always clean, and that sometimes the officer was rude or aggressive when putting on the shackles.

As part of the centralization of services to Burnaby, Youth Custody Services changed the way they transported female youth from outside the Lower Mainland. They did not want female youth travelling a long distance by road or ferry with male or female adults, or male youth offenders. They therefore made arrangements that any female youth being transported from outside the Lower Mainland would travel by air with a sheriff. However, if a young woman could not fly for medical reasons or because of a flying phobia, arrangements were made to transport that youth by road.

*"I flew [from the Northern Interior]. I think it was a lot better than taking a sheriff's van."*

One youth recounted being transported by road from Prince George to Burnaby and another had taken the ferry from Vancouver Island, but the rest confirmed that they had flown the majority of the way. As with youth in the Lower Mainland, most felt that the sheriffs who transported them were respectful and treated them well. For those whose journey had also included road travel by police car or sheriff's van, the experience had generally been positive, although a few complained of being hungry during the journey.

Youth from small communities talked about feeling ashamed and embarrassed when they saw people they knew while being transported out of their community (including teachers, friends of their parents, and students from their school).

The most consistent complaint about being flown to Vancouver International Airport for transfer to Burnaby was that the young women were shackled. They felt embarrassed to have to walk through the airport in shackles and sit on the plane in them. Almost all of the young women who had travelled by plane noted that they felt people were staring at them. They felt that because they were in handcuffs and other restraints, people would think they must have committed a serious crime. In reality the majority were being transported to Burnaby for an administration of justice offence.

“ I was shackled and handcuffed and lock boxed. We had to go through the South terminal of the airport which was really weird because all the passengers and staff and the people who take the luggage off were staring at me. Like you went and killed somebody or something like that because you're shackled and cuffed. ”

*“It’s like they want to humiliate you, because you go on the plane and you’re in handcuffs and shackles, and everybody looks at you like you’re a murderer or something. And you have to go through the airport in handcuffs and shackles with the sheriff right beside you. Everyone’s looking at you. It just sucks. I didn’t murder anyone, I breached my probation but they don’t know that.”*

Those who had needed to use the bathroom while shackled were embarrassed that the sheriff had to accompany them to the washroom and stand outside the stall.

*“You can’t use the bathroom on the plane but there’s a bathroom in the airport but the sheriff has to go in with you, ‘cause they think that you’re trying to escape. They like hold your stall for you, you’re not allowed to lock it. I even had a sheriff be in between the door and the closure, there was no way I could close it.”*

Although several youth had been thrilled to fly for the first time in their life, others who were struggling with anxiety or who were scared of flying

found that being handcuffed added to their unease. For example, one said, *“If the plane was going to crash, I was in ankle shackles and handcuffs, what can I really do? I can’t reach up and grab the safety jacket and I sure know that the sheriff that was transporting me was going to look after her own life before mine. It made me quite anxious.”*

The other complaints that were raised were about having to stay in holding cells while flights were arranged or if flights were delayed because of bad weather.

Youth who had experience of being transported to other custody centres as well as Burnaby were asked to compare the experiences. All preferred their travel to the other centres. Their reasons included shorter travel times, feeling like Burnaby was a long way from home, and feeling that when transportation was local it was provided by more welcoming and familiar staff. One youth also reported that she was only shackled when travelling to Burnaby, which had not happened to her previously.





With repeat sentences and trips to court, a few youth reported they had been flown to and from Burnaby on ten or more occasions. They queried how this was more cost effective than keeping them in Victoria or Prince George.

*“How much are they spending on plane rides and ferries? In the last two months, I took twelve plus plane rides.”*

All youth who had been held in police cells while waiting to go to court or be transported to Burnaby reported that this was a negative experience. Young women had stayed from a few hours to nine days, with most staying a day or two in cells. They consistently complained of poor food, boredom, and being cold. A few spoke of feeling isolated and disoriented because they were withdrawing from substances. Those who had been held the longest also complained of an inability to attend to their personal hygiene needs such as showering or cleaning their teeth. Sitting in a cell with nothing to occupy them had also exacerbated pre-existing mental health challenges for a couple of youth.

There were no discrepancies between the initial and follow-up interviews in how young women reported their experiences being transported into custody. However, two young women added at follow-up that they had appreciated the respectful way they were treated by the sheriff who escorted them.

*“I had to go through customs and everything and there were so many people. I was like ‘I don’t want to let anybody see me.’ I told the sheriff ‘Can you make it as discreet as possible and just get me on the plane?’ She had her bag and put it over my shackles on my lap and I just twisted up my shackles on my legs. She was so cool. She was awesome.”*

*“I was only cuffed on my hands so I just put my sweater over my hands so it didn’t look like it. I just walked like this and the sheriff was nice. She wasn’t wearing sheriff’s clothes, she was wearing normal clothes... I like flying personally and I also like that if you’re trusted and if you’re not a runner that you can go without shackles and that’s a great thing because it draws less attention to you.”*

When asked about transportation out of custody, about a third of young women reported that they were transported by their family, foster parents, romantic partner or professionals such as probation officers or social workers.

Those leaving the Lower Mainland reported mixed experiences, with some flying or taking a ferry alone and others being accompanied by a sheriff. Those who flew alone were generally met by their social worker or probation officer at the airport. One youth reported being driven back to the North in a sheriff’s van. Another youth had to wear shackles when escorted by a sheriff on the plane back to Prince George, as she was going back to court before being discharged.

*“I didn’t have a release plan—normally they tell you ‘you’re going here’, ‘you’re court ordered to go there,’ but I got off [my charges] so they dropped me off at the ferry and then I had to take a bus home. They dropped me off at the ferry in Vancouver and that was it, ‘bye see you later.’”*

*“One of the workers took me to the ferry, but they don’t come on the ferry with you or anything. They just give you a ticket and drive you to the ferry station.”*

*“ I flew back to Prince George on my own. It was exciting. I was in my regular clothes, I wasn’t in handcuffs or shackles so it was alright. Nobody was with me, it was just myself. ”*

# Life in custody

## Differences in treatment between male and female residents

In 2007, female youth identified major differences in the way male and female residents were treated, including being held to different standards of behaviour and females experiencing discrimination and sexist attitudes from male staff and residents.

In this study, the majority of female youth did not feel they had enough contact with male residents to comment on differences in treatment between genders. Among participants who did comment, most felt that male and female residents were treated equitably, and around 1 in 3 thought that males received less favorable treatment. They were of the opinion that the staff had no option but to be stricter with male youth, as the males pushed against the rules more and were more destructive of centre property than the females.

*“They might get it a bit harder, but they’re guys so they bring it on themselves.”*

*“We’re treated the same way. Everything we get, they get. The boys just destroy most of the stuff.”*

Among those who felt that females fared less well than males in custody, some attributed this to the lack of females in custody meaning they could not access as many programs or opportunities for physical activity as the males. Others felt that gender stereotyping meant that males were allowed to indulge in behaviours that would be considered unacceptable for females such as shouting, climbing, and fighting.

“ I feel like the boys have more freedom because when you’re in the courtyard, you see them on the windows staring and climbing on things and when the girls do that, we get in so much trouble for it. Even the staff say, ‘What’s wrong with the boys’ staff? Why aren’t they on them?’ ”



TRACK AND FIELD PITCH, BYCS

# Relationships in custody

## Relationships with staff

Although not every resident liked every staff member, the majority felt that staff treated them fairly. They were able to identify a staff member they would feel safe talking to and noted that if they treated the staff with respect, they received the same in return.

*“I realized that they treated the ones that respected them better, with better respect back.”*

At the follow-up interviews, young women talked about missing staff since their discharge, and of the support they had received while in custody.

*“I miss the staff, I really do.”*

*“There’s a few other people and a lot of the program staff I wish I could’ve kept in contact with but they said I can call anytime. I’ve got their numbers.”*

In 2007, female youth spoke about the sexist attitudes of some male staff. By the time of the current study, most staff they encountered were female, and male staff only worked on living units to cover breaks or in response to an emergency situation such as when a restraint was taking place.

Most young women felt that their interactions with male staff were positive, but a couple complained about inappropriate or flirtatious behaviour of individual males who worked within the centre and who would occasionally work on the female units to cover for staff breaks. Examples of flirtatious behaviour included winking and the way staff looked at them.

Almost all young women felt that it was preferable to have only female staff on their living units. Several worried that when male staff were on their units covering breaks or following a restraint, they might come into their rooms where there were no cameras, although this had rarely happened.

## Relationships with residents

When interviewed in custody, young women reported a range of experiences getting along with other residents. A few felt there was social segregation based on the community they came from, while others reported that everyone mixed regardless of their home community.

*“Sometimes I’d be friends with them, sometimes there’d be extreme beef.”*

Of the 23 who completed a follow-up interview, 16 reported they maintained contact with friends they made in custody. However, this contact had rarely been in person unless they were housed together in a group home or treatment facility.

*“I don’t think any relationship with somebody in jail can be positive. Some girls I got close with, we had our little group of friends, but I haven’t really talked to any of them since I got out. They’re on my Facebook but it’s an embarrassing thing that I was in jail. I don’t talk to them. I don’t associate with any of them anymore. I just worry about my own life.”*

*“When the guy staff go into our rooms and shut the door behind them and are standing in our rooms, I don’t like that. There should be women staff to do that. The cameras can’t even see. What if they do something?”*

”

## Bullying

In addition to general questions about how they got along with other residents, participants were asked specifically about bullying. In 2007, young women reported that a culture of bullying existed in all BC custody centres, where they were often both perpetrators and victims. Any resident who was seen as different was considered a justifiable target for bullying. A few young women also spoke of being bullied by male staff.

In this study, fewer young women reported being bullied by staff, but a couple did feel they were treated less favorably or singled out by staff who did not like them. However, all young women reported that the culture of bullying between residents continued. At the initial interviews in custody, only two residents said they had not been involved in bullying either as a victim or perpetrator. At the time of the second interview, these two also reported they had been involved in bullying while in custody.

*“Bullying happens a lot. Like every day girls are ganging up on each other.”*

Most bullying was verbal, but young women also described spitting at a person, on their food, and in their belongings; physical assaults; deciding which table a victim could sit at for meals; and pushing intimidating notes under someone’s door.

Most youth felt that bullying was an inevitable part of custody life and that nothing could be done about it. Youth with experience of other centres felt that bullying had gone on there too, but the only difference was that the bullying had a more racist content in Burnaby.

*“For sure I’ve bullied someone. Everyone does. I just tend to get pissed off when I am here. I have a short fuse and everyone just eggs you on. They want the drama.”*

*“We’re in jail. You gotta expect it when you come to jail. You get bullied. That’s just how it is, so you can’t really do anything about it.”*

All youth who bullied others justified their behaviour and felt that the victim deserved to be bullied.

*“If you’re going to come into my house and talk shit, you get what you deserve. I don’t have a home on the outs... This is my home. This is what keeps me stable. This is the most positive place I’ve lived, so if you think you’re gonna come in here and disrespect this place and the people, then I don’t think so. You’re not going to get away with it.”*

“ They spat in my laundry while it was drying. They spat in my milk while it was in the fridge. They spat in my icing during cooking. But there is pretty much nothing the staff can do after it has happened, and then they would know you had ratted if you did tell the staff and that would just make it worse. ”

Several of the residents spoke about a culture of “heavies and scrubs.” Heavies were described as young women who had influence on their unit because they were well connected to other residents or had served multiple or extended sentences. Scrubs were those who were bullied because they were new to the centre, were different in some way (including race), or were socially isolated. Young women who entered custody for the first time or were new to a unit were expected to be deferential to the heavies already on the unit or they would be victimized.

*“You gotta come in and be like ‘K, this is not my place. I’ve never been here before. I gotta learn from these girls’ ‘cause if you do kinda get a bit cocky, you’re going down. They won’t take that.”*

Most felt that staff could do little to intervene because the young women generally ensured staff were not present before they bullied someone. When staff did know it was happening, their response to bullying appeared to be mixed. Some youth recounted incidents of staff not intervening or being slow to intervene when they heard one youth threaten another, while others felt that staff stepped in immediately. Residents reported that bullying was dealt with by moving residents to other units, sending them to their room, through a mediation process, or through a meeting with senior staff.

*“One of the staff is really good. When they know something is going to happen they’ll come and sit right beside you at the table.”*

*“This girl told me she was going to punch me in the head in front of a teacher and they did nothing. They shouldn’t be allowed to do that and get away with it.”*

Youth’s suggestions to improve the bullying situation included always having a staff member outside of the office and on the living units. This would enable the staff to hear what was being said between residents. They also suggested having staff trained to respond consistently and early to bullying, and having stricter punishments for residents caught bullying.

The female secure unit has eight beds and the open unit has 16 beds (with no more than eight residents at any one time). Young women suggested that there should be no more than four young women on a unit together. They suggested that opening more units would provide an opportunity for those who were being bullied to be moved.

“ I was fine. Didn’t matter where I was, I had a lot of friends in there and I happened to have friends that were the heavies or whatever you want to call them, so no one really bugged me. ”

## Sexual contact

When asked in 2007 about consensual sexual contact between residents, six admitted they had engaged in sexual activity with a male resident and more knew of others who had done so. All felt that staff had been unaware of these incidents.

In this study, at the first interview no female youth reported that they had engaged in sexual contact with a male resident, and the vast majority were adamant that it could not happen. However, a couple of youth said they were aware that it had happened, either in the past or while they were currently at the centre.

At the follow-up interview, young women were again asked if there had been any sexual contact with male residents. All continued to report that they had not engaged in sexual activity, but there was an increase in the number who reported knowing about other residents having consensual sexual contact with male residents. A few youth who reported that they were aware of sexual contact said it had occurred in the rotunda bathroom, while others did not specify.

*“I remember two people had sex in the bathroom in the big rotunda, it was so nuts. They both... moved to Adult.”*

Some of the female youth spoke about relationships developing between male and female residents that were romantic but not sexual. Examples of these included residents who left notes around the centre for their romantic partner to find, and others who talked to each other through windows.

*“[There are] definitely no sexual relationships, maybe writing people. That’s about it.”*

In terms of unwanted sexual contact, no females spoke of any inappropriate contact from staff. A couple noted that occasionally female and male youth would get left in the same place by accident, and at that time they might be physically sexually harassed.

“ Sometimes accidents happen with Control and the guys and girls will be there and the guys will do things like grab your ass. In the visits hall there’s no cameras and things can happen, in the open school too. Sometimes the staff leave and it can happen, some of the guys are just pigs. ”



## Visits and maintaining contact with family

Young women were asked about maintaining contact with family during their time at Burnaby. Some had not wanted to, while others reported their family did not want contact with them, or they did not have any family.

Young women from outside the Lower Mainland noted that the greater travelling distance prevented some family members from visiting. They also reported that their cellphone was confiscated when they were first arrested and processed outside the Lower Mainland. For several youth, this meant that they did not have contact numbers for family members when they got to Burnaby because these were stored in their phone.

*“Well, the first thing is [coming from Prince George to Burnaby] you don’t get to see your family. You get stuck in a room full of girls who you don’t even know.”*

While some young women were relieved to be away from friends in the community who they felt were a bad influence, others were upset that they could not have contact with their friends and romantic partners as well as extended family. Several reported that they were in custody for breaching a no contact order with their boyfriend and noted they intended to continue to see them when they were released.

Video technology was introduced to Burnaby in January 2013 as a way for those in custody to maintain contact with their family. Among the 19 young women from outside the Lower Mainland interviewed in custody after this date, few had accessed it. A couple had tried but the technology had not worked, whereas a couple had successfully used it to speak to family or a professional such as a lawyer—an experience which they had found useful.

Among the remainder who were from outside the Lower Mainland, the attitude was mixed about this service. For example, a young woman from the North felt that using video visits as a way of staying in contact with her family was not the same as having in-person visits, so she had not used it as she felt it would be emotionally too difficult. Another reported that her family would be suspicious of who was listening to the conversation. A third youth reported that it would have been useful because her family could not visit in person, but she had not been offered this service.

Experiences of in-person visits were also varied. One youth noted that her family had received financial support for two family members to visit from outside the Lower Mainland. Another reported that although her family had received support to visit her in Prince George, this had not been made available for them to visit her in Burnaby.

“ I don’t like to be far away from home.  
No one can even come and visit me here. ”



VISITS COURT YARD, BYCS

In total, 1 in 5 of those from outside the Lower Mainland said their family had not visited because of the distance and time it took from their home community. Other barriers to in-person visits included a family member being refused a visit because they did not have identification; a family member finding the booking system at Burnaby too confusing or being told all visits were full; a family member having been a resident in the Burnaby centre when it was a women's prison so not wanting to visit; and a family member having been refused a visit because they had been caught smuggling contraband into the centre previously.

While some youth maintained contact with family by telephone when they could not visit, others were unable to do so. The primary reason was that they did not have the telephone number. They also reported that at the Burnaby centre it was harder to stay in touch by phone with family. Unlike the other centres, they were not allowed incoming calls and had to keep outgoing phone calls to a maximum of 15 minutes.

When asked for suggestions about improving contact with family, a common suggestion was for youth to be allowed to access their cellphone's directory to retrieve phone numbers of family members. Other suggestions included longer phone calls and allowing extended family and community supports to be included on their call list. Young women also suggested that when family were visiting from outside the Lower Mainland, they be allowed to visit for more than an hour.



TRADITIONAL ART DESIGNED AND CREATED BY RESIDENTS AT BYCS

## Programming

In 2007, young women who had been in Burnaby were impressed by the range and quality of the programming offered. This was again the case, with youth who had experience of other centres praising the range of programs offered at Burnaby. However, it was felt that the types of cultural programming offered at Prince George should be available at Burnaby.

As in 2007, young women serving sentences of only a few days felt that they were not in custody long enough to take advantage of many of the programs offered. In the current study, young women who were serving long sentences or who were repeatedly entering custody felt that programs sometimes became repetitive and there was not enough variety.

*"I feel like we go to the same programs every single day... If they had more options, it would be better."*

In total, around half of young women were able to give concrete examples of skills they had gained through the custody programming. These were all skills that they felt they would use when released, or which they were currently using to better manage relationships within the centre.

*"The programs are all helpful. When the volunteers come in to do crafts and stuff with us, it's really good. I love art."*



At the time of the first interview, school programming was most commonly mentioned as the program the young women had found to be of greatest benefit. For many, learning to cook and sharing the meals they had prepared with others was a highlight of their time in custody and one of the most valuable skills they had learned.

Programs that taught other life skills such as sewing as well as art, girls group, programming with the pastor, and programs that helped youth to gain qualifications and to manage relationships and anger were also noted as being useful.

***“I learned that you need to express how you feel to completely understand what somebody else is feeling... I did that with some of the girls in there.”***

At the follow-up interviews, young women noted the anger management and interpersonal skills programming had been particularly useful because they had learned tangible skills they had been able to put into practice at the centre and in their community after discharge. Other programs that had proved valuable to young women after they left custody were those which had taught a range of skills for staying sober and avoiding substance use, and skills learned through the First Aid and CPR program.

***“Me and my mom have a better relationship because of the skills I learned in there. I learned to control my anger, I learned how to cope with different ways of dealing with people and talking to people, and it’s made me a better person to be interacting with people... The skills I learned from being on probation and being in jail, it really helped.”***



FRASER PARK SECONDARY SCHOOL, BYCS

Suggestions for additional programs included multicultural programs to combat racism, more sports and outdoor activities, more extensive Aboriginal cultural programming, and more guest speakers who could talk about overcoming the struggles the young women were facing.

Another suggestion was to have programs available in the community which offered young women the opportunity to grow and develop the skills they had learned in custody while living back in the community and facing the additional challenges which came with that.

At the follow-up interviews, young women suggested that they would have benefitted from more outdoor programming and increased opportunities for physical activity.

**“ The drug and alcohol programming was great. ”**

## Cultural programming

When interviewed in custody, only ten young women discussed cultural programming in any depth. The remainder did not know about it, did not feel it was relevant to them, or skipped that question. Only two non-Aboriginal youth talked about Aboriginal programming and felt it was something that could help to reduce racism by helping them to learn more about Aboriginal culture. One said, *“You can do teepee teachings. You can do a sweat lodge, you can learn about the creator. You can learn about other religions here. It’s pretty good. I like it.”*

One Aboriginal youth said that cultural programs were available but she chose not to participate, and the remaining youth had differing experiences. The youth who had been in Prince George preferred the programming in that centre to what was offered in Burnaby but were unable to articulate their reasons. One said, *“In Prince George I like it. They have drumming, they have teepee teachings. Down here just doesn’t seem right. They do everything different.”*

Among those who only had experience of Burnaby, one Aboriginal youth felt that *“They have everything here. It’s like a little community just in a building.”* Another enjoyed the moccasin making in particular, while another felt that the programming should be expanded and said, *“Half the girls in here don’t really know their culture. They have that teepee and park out there, but do they often use it?”*

One youth who had been in the centre less than a week when first interviewed said at that time, *“I always did smudging with my mom. So I keep asking about Aboriginal education and they said that there’s a lady and a guy that comes in every now and then. I just don’t know when that is.”*



ABORIGINAL TRADITIONS AND LEARNING PARK, BYCS

“ I liked the programming that they did, the Aboriginal programming, the schooling programming, the drug and alcohol programming was great. Burnaby Custody is a great custody centre. They have a lot of things that kids need in life. ”

# Services

## Health care

In 2007, young women were generally satisfied with the health care they received in custody, although they felt that pain medications could be distributed in a timelier manner and that health care should be provided by female staff.

In the current study, most young women were impressed with the health care they received while in custody. They confirmed that with the exception of one male doctor and male nurse who administered medication, their health care was provided by female staff. Many talked at length about their experiences, detailing various tests and services they had received. For some, they got health care at the centre that they had needed but not been able to access in the community.

*“The health services here are good. They come and give you your med at nighttime and in the morning, throughout the day and everything.”*

All young women reported that they had met with health care staff as part of their intake to the centre, and noted that this had been a positive experience.

Most young women felt that their requests for health care were dealt with in an acceptable time frame although, as in 2007, a few felt that their requests for sleeping pills, pain killers, and medications to assist with drug withdrawal had not been taken seriously. They speculated that this may have been because staff assumed they had a drug addiction and were wanting, rather than needing, these medications.

*“Health care is good here but it takes a while though because they’re really busy so if you got a headache or something you kinda gotta wait. Might take a couple hours sometimes or might be right away.”*

“ They have really, really good people here, really smart medical people. They just know what they’re doing. ”



HEALTH CARE DEPARTMENT, BYCS

A couple of youth reported that they had a presenting medical condition which they felt required urgent or ongoing attention but that the care they needed was unavailable at the centre. For example, one reported that she had been attending physiotherapy in the community following an accident but had not been able to access this service in custody. Another young woman was borrowing other residents' glasses because hers had been broken for some time.

For some young women with experience of other centres, accessing health care in Burnaby was considered more complicated. The process of filling in a health care request form created obstacles for those with literacy issues or who did not yet trust that Burnaby staff would keep their information confidential.

Young women who had experience of Prince George did not note any difference between Burnaby and Prince George in relation to the health care they accessed. However, those who had been in Victoria mourned the loss of the relationships they had with health care staff there. They also felt that because there were fewer youth in Victoria, the health care system was more proactive and response times were quicker than at Burnaby.

*“We don’t really see the nurses here unless you’re already on meds or you make a request. And there [in Victoria] the nurses come around to each unit like twice a day, so you can get to them more.”*

During follow-up interviews, young women reported that they had appreciated having their medications reviewed during their stay in custody, and that their prescriptions had been adjusted if needed.

When asked for suggestions as to how health care services might be improved, few young women had any suggestions. Those who did felt that their health care concerns, particularly around their substance withdrawal, had not been taken seriously, and asked that health care staff take the time to listen and respond to their health care worries. They also requested that health care forms be processed quicker as some had waited up to a week to see a doctor after submitting a form and felt this was too long. Access to professionals such as a chiropractor or physiotherapist was something a couple of young women suggested during their follow-up interviews.



YOGA ROOM AND GYM, BYCS

## Mental health

In 2007, the young women who had received mental health services in custody had found them valuable. However, most had not accessed these services because of fear of being victimized if other residents found out.

By the time of the current study, stigma appeared to be less of an issue. Young women who had wanted assistance with mental health concerns reported that they had been able to access services such as a psychiatrist, psychologist, and/or a counsellor. At the time of their first interview, all who had wanted to access mental health services said they had met with a counsellor at the centre at least once.

***“I talked to a counsellor all the time. She was great.”***

Youth also highlighted other supports they received which they felt promoted their positive mental health, such as the girls group. One said, ***“We just talk and they bring up topics like friendships and it’s really helpful.”*** The pastor was also noted as a very helpful source of support for young women dealing with mental health issues.

Those who did not access mental or emotional health supports noted that these supports had been offered to them but they had chosen to not access them. The reasons they gave included not trusting people they did not know, and preferring to deal with issues by themselves or with the assistance of support networks they had in the community.

Young women suggested that it would be helpful to have more mental health counsellors available to reduce the burden on the current counsellors and on the drug and alcohol counsellors. This would allow youth to have more regular appointments with their counsellor if they felt they needed them. Having more counsellors would also give youth a choice if there was a personality clash with their assigned counsellor.

At the follow-up interviews, youth who had accessed mental health services remained impressed by them. One example was of the centre supporting a young woman through a tragedy in her life by not only ensuring she saw her custody centre counsellor but also her community counsellor.

“ The mental health staff is pretty good. I see a counsellor once a week. ”



TRANQUILITY ROOM, BYCS

## Dental care

In 2007, young women complained about a lack of needed dental care and were unaware that they were entitled to free dental care while in custody.

In this study, some girls who were in for a short period of time or were early into serving their first sentence were still not aware that they could see a dentist at no charge while in custody. However, others had taken advantage of this service. Young women had accessed emergency dental services as well as cleaning, fillings, and care of braces.

*“They’ll listen if you need the dentist... I was just over there doing my dental assessment.”*

Among those who had accessed a dentist while in custody, reviews were mixed about the care they received. Some thought the care was excellent while others complained about the quality. One example was a complaint about care of a broken brace, and another about being given uneven fillings. One youth said she had asked for dental care but had not yet received it. She thought the dentist only visited once a month and it had not yet been a month since she put in her request.



DENTIST OFFICE, BYCS

## Sexual health

Young women felt their sexual health needs were being met, including access to contraception as well as testing and treatment for sexually transmitted infections. Those who were interviewed a second time added that they had been equipped with everything they would need in terms of sexual health before returning to the community.

Young women who had not had the HPV vaccine prior to entering Burnaby reported that they were offered this vaccine in custody. Participants were grateful that their care was provided by female medical staff.

*“I got a lot of my stuff done: The [HPV] injection, I got a pap test, I got checks for all that stuff. They were really good with that.”*

As in 2007, sexually active female youth noted that custody was often the only place where they got sexual health care and information. Several requested that more programming time be spent teaching them about sexual health and birth control, as they felt they lacked knowledge about these topics.

“ I was able to see a dentist in here. It was helpful. ”



## Prenatal care

A small minority of young women were pregnant at the time they were first interviewed. As in 2007, they were generally impressed with the health care and health information they were offered, and noted that the library had pregnancy resources which they could borrow.

*“They went on the Internet and printed a bunch of stuff out for me to read. They are booking an appointment for me to go to the hospital to get an ultrasound. They are ordering me pregnancy vitamins. They do a lot.”*

The young women who were pregnant, and several of those who were not currently pregnant but had previously been or expected to be in the future, suggested that a parenting program would be helpful at the centre to prepare residents for life in the community. One who had been in Burnaby previously said that in theory a parenting program was available, but it was not currently being offered so suggested it be made operational.

One young woman who had become a parent since leaving custody felt that she received good health care at Burnaby during her pregnancy and had been given helpful information about parenting which she was putting into practice.

## Confidentiality in health care

In 2007, concerns about confidentiality, particularly around mental health care, had been a major barrier to young women seeking care. In this study, many young women provided concrete examples of when their information had been kept confidential, such as when service providers in the community had tried to access information about them. They were also aware of how serious it was if health care staff breached their confidentiality, and spoke about how this was explained to them when they were told about their rights.

Despite this improvement, six young women reported that they had overheard health care staff talking about their own or another resident's health care. Some youth also felt that the unit staff had shared their personal health care information with other residents. These young women suggested that staff receive training on confidentiality, and that all staff be reminded to close office windows and doors when talking about residents.

“Confidentiality is good. They say, ‘the only time that I have to tell somebody is if you are going to harm yourself or harm another person’.”

## Substance use

Three quarters of the young women stated that they had been dealing with substance use problems before they entered custody. Excessive alcohol and marijuana use were the most common problems identified. Also, around a fifth acknowledged they had been having problems because of their crystal meth use.

*“Before I came into custody I was addicted to crystal meth. I used every day... I had such high tolerance... It was in every choice I made in the day. It was everything. It was like my shadow.”*

*“I was an alcoholic. I drank every day. I would drink until I blacked out.”*

At the follow-up interviews two more young women acknowledged that they had been addicted to alcohol before entering custody. After initially denying they had a problem, both reported they had accessed the drug and alcohol counsellors in custody. One had subsequently remained sober since being discharged and the other reported that she had accessed Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) while in custody. However, although she had found these helpful as a source of support at the time, she said she made a conscious decision to return to substance use when discharged.

## Use of alcohol or other drugs in custody

Young women were asked about the availability of alcohol and other drugs while in custody. While some were reluctant to discuss this, more than a third said at their first interview that either they had used alcohol or other drugs themselves, had been offered them by other residents, or had witnessed someone else using.

*“I don’t do drugs here and if I do it’s not like hard drugs or anything.”*

*“I just get some pot every once in a while.”*

A few youth who had wanted to access alcohol or other drugs had been unable to do so, and others reported that they had not seen any banned substances at the centre.

At the second interview another nine young women, who had initially indicated not knowing of anyone using substances at the centre, reported that they had used or witnessed others using prior to their release. Examples included residents making their own alcohol; residents smuggling in chewing tobacco, marijuana, and other drugs; visitors bringing in drugs; and residents sharing each other’s prescription medication.

“ I was never able to get any alcohol or other drugs but I did know girls who brought them in. ”



## Substance use treatment in custody

When asked about programs and supports to address their alcohol or other drug use, the young women talked about the availability of AA and NA meetings and drug and alcohol counsellors. At the time of their first interview, 34 had accessed the drug and alcohol counselling service at Burnaby, and six had requested this service and were awaiting their first appointment.

*“Some programs are really helpful like D&A counsellors and stuff, yeah people on the outs come in and do AA meetings.”*

*“Drug and alcohol counsellors... They’re great. They are really, really good. I like them a lot. They give you support, they give you confidence, the support you need so it’s really good. The first thing I asked for when I got here was an AA counsellor and they gave it to me right away.”*

The majority of young women who accessed the services and programs available to them in custody felt that these were helping them to address their substance use. However, a small minority acknowledged that they were not ready to give up their substance use. These youth were able to articulate that alcohol or other drugs were directly related to them entering custody, and felt that it was inevitable that they would return to custody as a result of future use.

Among young women who had been at Victoria and Prince George, it was difficult for some to work with a new drug and alcohol counsellor and to learn to trust and open up to a new person. Some chose not to access services as a result, while others reported that although they found it difficult, they appreciated the availability of counsellors and the other substance use services at Burnaby.

Young women who were successfully living in the community at the time of the second interview reported that they had been able to participate in a variety of programs to address substance use while in custody but that it was challenging to apply what they learned to their life outside of custody. Those who were still seeing a counsellor in the community felt that this continuity was important in helping them to remain substance free.

One youth was particularly grateful that her counsellor before entering Burnaby had continued to visit her while in custody and upon discharge. She felt that this continuity combined with the AA and NA programming at the custody centre had been extremely beneficial in helping her to successfully reintegrate into her community.

Treatment programs in the community were also felt to have been useful to those who had attended them upon discharge from custody. Others admitted that they had decided to return to using substances once they were discharged from custody, and had disengaged from counselling and other substance use services as a result.

“ I’ll have a person sit there and talk to me about booze and stuff, but like honestly, I’ll listen to them, but I know as soon as I get out I’m going to be the same person I was. ”

When asked what improvements could be made to substance use programming, a common suggestion was to ensure all young women who requested drug and alcohol counsellors have immediate access to this service when they entered custody, as well as more frequent AA and NA meetings. Giving up smoking without any aids had also been difficult for some young women, and providing support to quit smoking was another popular suggestion.

*“Give us Nicorette, like gum or like patches, or even those electric smokes or something ‘cause we all go crazy.”*

A few young women talked about feeling pleased with themselves for having gone through the process of withdrawal without medication. Others felt they should have had more support during this time and suggested that medications or methadone be available to those who were in withdrawal when they entered the centre.

*“I was coming down off drugs and it was the worst time and them not helping me. I was in the methadone program on the outs so in my first couple of days in [custody] I was in my room puking, sick, it was not good, not good at all. I said I need my methadone, it’s not good to go without, but they didn’t get that to me. If somebody is on methadone you can’t take that away from them. That’s their confidence. I was suicidal.”*

*“The nurse was keeping an eye on me because I was really high and they came into my room in the middle of the night to check my pulse. They said I was fine and they just had to watch me coming down... and they did a good job of that.”*

When asked what would be helpful in the community with regard to their substance use, suggestions included having a substance free girls group, having access to mentors who had been able to stay sober after they left custody, having structure and routine, and having counselling and AA meetings available to youth in their home community.



“ I need someone who could just really make sure that I don’t screw up because girls always come back here because, once they’re out, all the structure just falls to pieces. You don’t have that anymore. You’re out on your own and you can do what you want. So the structure here, if they could carry on with that on the outs, that’d be good. ”

## Self-harm

When female youth were interviewed in 2007, just over a third had either self-harmed or were aware of another resident who had done so while in custody. At that time, the young women who discussed deliberately cutting or injuring themselves spoke of using razors, pencils, lighters, and needles, and of refusing needed medication as a way of harming themselves.

Among the young women interviewed between 2012 and 2014, again more than one in three reported that they had deliberately cut or injured themselves on purpose or they were aware of other female youth who had done so at the centre. The most common reasons for doing so were to relieve stress and frustration or to feel in control.

*“A lot of [the girls here] have scars on their arms and legs. They’ll even carve letters into their arms describing how much they hate their life.”*

Examples of ways that residents had self-harmed or seen others self-harm included cutting themselves with razors given to residents in the shower, stabbing themselves with pencils and other school supplies such as protractors, self tattooing, and behaviours such as banging their head against a wall.

*“I see girls that will literally grow their nails just so they could scratch their arms and make themselves bleed.”*

Young women who did self-harm said that their behaviour was often triggered by something that happened within the custody centre such as being locked down, getting into a fight with another resident, being bullied or receiving bad news about their sentence or options upon release.

In 2007, a couple of the youth who self-harmed felt that custody staff were unsympathetic. This was

still the case, although many more felt that staff were doing all they could to prevent residents from self-harming. Examples of steps staff took included counting cutlery, removing sharp objects from residents’ rooms, and making sure that residents considered to be “at risk” had access to counsellors and were checked on regularly.

*“The staff are good at keeping girls from hurting themselves. It’s one of their most important duties to make sure we don’t harm ourselves.”*

For young women who had experience of centres other than Burnaby, they did not notice a difference in self-harm behaviours across the centres. However, one commented that in her experience it was youth who had done the more serious crimes who tended to self-harm so that resulted in her seeing more young women self-harm at Burnaby.

Young women who did not self-harm expressed sympathy for some of those who did if they felt they were dealing with major mental health issues. In contrast, there was a level of condemnation for other youth who self-harmed, and a sense that they would be bullied if it was discovered that they were cutting themselves.

*“Girls don’t want blood all over their unit. It’s gross, nasty.”*

When asked what else could be done to support female youth who self-harmed, many thought that custody services were doing all that they could. One resident thought that although some health care staff had treated her appropriately and with respect when she had sought medical care after cutting herself, others could benefit from training about how to work with young women who self-harmed.

“Cutting. It is kinda understandable, it is a release, right? You can’t go to drugs in here. You can’t have a cigarette. You can’t punch a punching bag.”

## Food and hunger

When McCreary published the results of a survey of the health of all youth in custody (see page 8) it showed that youth were more likely to report going to bed hungry inside custody than in the community. Youth Custody Services immediately responded to this by adding an extra evening snack at each centre. Through the Next Steps process, youth were asked about their experience with hunger and the reasons they went to bed hungry. Most youth had noticed the addition of the snack, and noted that dinner was often served before they did active evening programming which was what resulted in them going to bed hungry. Custody Services are now looking to change meal times.

While two young women who entered custody prior to the addition of the evening snack complained about being hungry in custody, those who had entered after the addition of the snack had no such complaints.

*“I can’t complain, it’s food. It’s not that bad, it’s alright. The breakfasts need to be better. The lunches and dinners are pretty good. The amount’s not an issue. There’s lots of food here.”*

If young women did complain about the food, it was usually about the breakfasts which they thought were the least healthy and enjoyable meal of the day, or about the lack of choice if they did not like what was being served. Some also felt there were not enough fresh fruit and vegetables available to them, and that given the amount of programming which happened in the evening, it would be preferable to have dinner later so that they had a larger meal nearer bedtime.

*“We get in to eat at four-thirty. We have maybe 20 minutes to eat. Then everyone’s like, ‘OK, let’s go, we have a five o’clock program.’”*

Young women who had experience of Prince George and Victoria preferred the food at those locations and felt that portions at Burnaby were smaller and less nutritious. However, young women who only had experience of Burnaby were reasonably satisfied and also liked that they could earn food through the canteen.

*“The meals here are typically good. They’re better than hospital. Lunches are better than dinner.”*

*“The food here is actually pretty good.”*

Youth who had complained about the food reported that their complaint had been taken seriously, and gave examples such as the milk being changed to fat-free when requested.

The most common concern that young women raised about food was in relation to it being used for bullying. Several gave accounts of young women being forced to hand over food that they got from the canteen to others, or having their food and drinks spat in.

*“I see people stealing people’s food. People spit in each other’s food.”*

Young women felt their access to water was unreasonably restricted. One said she had taken her concerns to a residents’ meeting and requested access to a water jug but at that point had not received a response. Another thought there was no point complaining because staff just told them to buy water at the canteen.

*“I never made a complaint over it because they’re just like, ‘Oh, buy it on canteen, but it’s like \$4 for a water bottle. Why would I do that when I only make, tops \$11 a week?’”*

*“You don’t really get enough liquids or anything. Liquids should be more accessible. We’re not able to get cups for water. The girls have to put their heads under the tap to get water.”*

## Safety

In 2007, 15 out of 19 young women interviewed in custody reported feeling safe. Yet many of these participants went on to describe incidents where their safety was threatened, or made statements such as, *“I always have to watch my back.”* Among those who took part in a follow-up interview, around half maintained that they had felt safe, while the others reflected that they had not felt as safe as they had stated during their first interview in custody. In 2012–14, this switch in perceptions of safety was not seen to the same extent among young women interviewed in the community.

In the current study, when interviewed for the first time around eight out of ten youth reported that they felt safe in custody, and the remainder did not feel safe or were unsure if they felt safe. Their perceptions of safety generally did not change between their first and second interviews. However, at follow-up they were able to name specific incidents when they had felt less safe, such as when a camera broke, there had been a high resident-to-staff ratio or when a resident had verbally or physically attacked them. Among the minority who did change their perspective at follow-up, some felt less safe and others felt safer than they had initially reported.

At the first interviews, three-quarters of those from the Lower Mainland reported that they currently felt safe in custody, compared to around half of those from outside the area. Youth with experience of centres other than Burnaby reported that they generally felt safer at the other centres because those were smaller and had fewer residents. They also knew the staff better so were more confident they would intervene if something happened.

*“I felt safer in Victoria. Here’s different. There’s a lot more different girls and you never know...”*

Among youth who had served sentences at Victoria or Prince George and took part in both initial and follow-up interviews, the majority reported feeling safe at Burnaby during both interviews. A few initially felt unsafe but at follow-up reported feeling safer over time because they had made friends on their unit or had been moved to a different unit where they were no longer bullied. A youth who felt less safe at follow-up explained that she had been attacked by another resident and as a result felt nervous when staff were not present. Another young woman said that although she initially felt unsafe, she came to feel physically safer over time but never felt emotionally safe because she was so far away from family and friends who lived in the North.

“ You’ve gotta keep your guard up in Burnaby, because staff can’t always get there as fast as you would want them to. ”



OPEN SCHOOL CLASSROOM, BYCS

Youth serving their first sentence and those who were victimized were the least likely to report feeling safe when interviewed in custody. Generally, youth who had friends in the centre whom they knew from the community or previous stays felt safer than other youth.

*“Knowing someone in custody made me feel safe. You always need somebody watching your back.”*

At follow-up, youth serving their first sentence were more likely to report feeling safer in custody than at their first interview. One youth who had not initially felt safe explained that she had made friends on her unit soon after the first interview and had spent the rest of her sentence feeling safe.

As in 2007, some noted that they felt safer in custody than they did when living in the community, and the majority felt at least as safe. Among youth who felt safe, their reasons included the presence of staff and cameras, their relationships with others on their unit, and having their own room which was locked at night.

When asked about their perceptions of their safety, most focused on physical safety. When prompted about emotional safety, those who felt less safe emotionally linked it to being separated from their partner, family, or community rather than to relationships within the centre. However, a few youth reported that cruel and discriminatory remarks from other residents made them feel unsafe.

Among those who did not feel safe, no one reported being scared of any staff member. The reasons they felt unsafe were either because they had been victimized or were worried about being victimized by other residents, or because they were on a unit with a youth with mental health challenges whose behaviour was unpredictable.

At follow-up, young women again talked about being intimidated by residents with active symptoms of mental illness or a reputation for violence. They did not feel they could trust these residents and worried about being the victim of an unprovoked attack.

*“I don’t feel as safe with people who have stabbed people and have tempers, whereas people who are just here on breaches and remands is where I feel more safe and that I belonged.”*

“The staff are really on the ball. They know what you’re doing, they watch your every move and it’s really secure. It’s a pretty safe place.”



The majority who had been victims of any type of aggression said it was verbal, and they had not believed it would escalate to physical violence. However, a couple of youth had either been in a physical fight or experienced threats to their physical safety from other youth.

Aboriginal young women noted that the racism they experienced from other young women in Burnaby affected their sense of safety. Some youth of white European origin had also been shocked by the level of racism aimed at non-white residents.

*“There’s a lot of racism down here. I have to look over my shoulder. There’s this gang called the White Supremacists, a lot of girls down here they usually go like ‘White power!’”*

At both interviews, young women mentioned that there were certain residents who were influential with other residents and who would target youth they did not like. If the participants were friends with these influential residents, they felt safe. If they were not or were targeted for some reason, they felt unsafe. Those who were intimidated had not reported this to staff for fear of being called a rat and escalating the situation.

When asked where they felt safest within the centre, residents usually identified their rooms or at church. They noted that if they felt unsafe anywhere it was in more open spaces where there was the possibility of interacting with others, such as in the hallways, rotunda, Mosaic room, locker room, kitchen, or courtyard. Youth with experience of both secure and open custody generally felt safest in open but noted it depended on their relationships within the unit.

*“I don’t feel safe walking down the hallways alone. You don’t know who is going to hop out of what door or something like that. Hallways always scare me. You just never know.”*

Around 10% of participants reported that they were dealing with issues such as anxiety, claustrophobia or panic attacks, which made it difficult for them to feel safe alone in their rooms.

Youth’s recommendations for improving safety included ensuring a staffing ratio of no more than eight residents to two staff; separating residents who do not get along; and increasing security in the rotunda and other areas where youth mix together.

It was also suggested that reducing racism by non-Aboriginal residents would create a safer atmosphere for all young women, and particularly for those who would previously have been housed in Prince George, where there was more of an Aboriginal cultural focus.

“ The rotunda. They mix guys and girls, open and secure so people are able to go at each other, which is why that’s probably the unsafest place. ”

## Privacy

When interviewed in custody and in the community, young women generally felt their privacy was respected as much as it could be. They had a clear understanding of when privacy might be breached at the centre, and gave examples such as during room searches, or if someone told a staff they were going to harm themselves or others.

*“[They respect our privacy] as much as they can. With random room searches they can’t really respect your privacy, but the rest of it, they treat everyone really nice.”*

As mentioned earlier, one example of when young women thought their privacy was not respected occurred when staff shared information about current and former residents with other residents or with each other within earshot of residents. Other examples were similar to those raised in 2007 and included staff reading residents’ journals, and walking into their rooms when they were changing, using the washroom, or were in the showers.

*“They read what we write in our books. Yeah, we ask them not to and we freak out and lose points for telling them not to read our stuff. That stuff is personal and they go ahead and read everything.”*

*“You could go to the bathroom or be changing and staff walks in and it’s awkward and you feel uncomfortable. You definitely change really fast or don’t go to the bathroom in your room.”*

Young women with experience of Victoria or Prince George either felt their privacy was well respected in every centre they had stayed in or worried more about their privacy being respected at Burnaby. This was primarily because Burnaby had more staff and therefore more people who received information about them. They had not developed the long-term relationships with staff that they had experienced in the centres they were more familiar with.

When asked for suggestions about any ways that their privacy could be more respected, the most common suggestion was to reduce the regularity of room checks at night. One summed up the responses of many when she said, *“They don’t really do anything to ruin your privacy except that it is annoying that they have to come in every 15 minutes when you’re trying to fall asleep. They poke [a flashlight] right at your face.”*

“ In Prince George I could talk to the staff about my problems. That’s how much I trust them. Down here, I don’t trust the staff because they tell other staff. They talk in front of the girls. They think the girls aren’t listening but really we are. ”



## Pat downs and strip searches

In 2007, all female youth felt that although pat downs and strip searches made them feel uncomfortable, they had been treated professionally and with respect when these had occurred. The same was true in the current study. However, unlike in 2007, no youth had been strip searched or patted down by a male staff.

Participants who had experience of Prince George and Victoria felt that searches at Burnaby were more thorough but always respectfully carried out. They appreciated always being given a towel to cover themselves at Burnaby, which had not always happened elsewhere. They also reported that female staff would make every effort to ensure the experience was as comfortable as possible. One youth who had been in custody in another province was particularly appreciative that strip searches only happened in Burnaby when needed, rather than as a matter of course. Others echoed this noting that strip searches were rare and often only at admission and then in response to incidents such as the theft of a sharp object.

*“Pat downs go by fast and they’re efficient.”*

*“Every time I come in here, I’ve been strip searched, but it’s decent. They let us hold a towel around us and kind of turn around.”*

Although they understood why strip searches and pat downs occurred, a few youth reported that they found the experience violating and degrading.

When asked if they had any suggestions for how the process could be improved, the majority felt that pat downs and strip searches were handled as professionally as they could be.

“ I get treated respectful but I am still not comfortable with it. ”

## Restraints

In total, about a third of youth had been restrained at some point during their interactions with the criminal justice system. When asked about experiences being restrained in custody since services were centralized, some were unable to differentiate between before and after centralization.

All youth who had been restrained at Burnaby felt that the restraints had been valid although a few felt excessive force was used, even if this was sometimes likely not intentional.

*“I was recently restrained—four days ago. That’s the one thing I did have a problem with, one of the staff actually, I don’t think he meant to, but he actually hit me and I was left in my room handcuffed, just left there pretty much for an hour.”*

When asked how the restraint process could be improved, suggestions included training staff to ensure they used restraint only as a last resort, and to only use the amount of force necessary. They also suggested sensitivity training for some staff who joked with residents about ‘taking them down’ as this created fear among some.

*“I prefer the staff to talk to residents instead of take them down.”*

Young women also felt that restraints should always be conducted by female staff. For those with a history of abuse, being restrained by a male staff was triggering.

*“The guys in their 30’s and 40’s really creep me out. No matter who they are. I think everyone’s a pedophile. That’s a problem. Like every guy who works here, I’m like ‘yup, you’re a pedophile.’ I don’t like to be around any of them. Everyone on my unit is a girl. They shouldn’t have guy staff come in. I think they should keep girl staff, to be honest.”*

“ I don’t like it. I don’t like the way the male staff take down. They’re a little rough. There’s ways to take down people without hurting them. Sometimes I feel like they use a little too much force. They should keep girl staff to do restraints and train them. ”

## Complaints process and resident input

In 2007, female youth reported a number of concerns about the complaints process. These included not knowing how to make a complaint, and if they had made a complaint not feeling like their complaints were taken seriously. There were also concerns that there may be retribution if youth made a complaint against a member of staff. As a result of this and other feedback, a number of changes were made to the complaint procedures across the three centres, including the introduction of drop boxes for complaints, the development of a complaints committee, and an orientation to the complaints process for each youth coming into custody.

In the current study, female youth knew that they had a right to make a complaint, and most could explain the complaints process. They spoke about receiving booklets about their rights and having a volunteer explain the complaints process to them. They could also identify where the complaints forms were located throughout the centre. Young women who had wanted to make a complaint and had interacted with the Youth Advocate were impressed by the service they received. They also reported complaining to line staff, supervisors, and the Representative for Children and Youth.

*"It's good. They have suggestion forms and complaints forms and stuff like that so it is good."*

Although the majority of youth could explain the complaints process, they also spoke about barriers to making a complaint. The biggest barrier appeared to be concerns that doing so would lead to being labelled a rat or a snitch by other residents. Most referred to the complaints form as the 'rat form.'

*"I talked to a staff and [other residents] were like 'why did you rat', and they're like 'cheese, cheese, eat your cheese, rat.' They say the worst things to you, just for making a complaint."*

*"I see those suggestions and complaints forms throughout the jail, and I have never seen that pen or paper touched."*

A minority of youth also feared being singled out for negative treatment by staff if they made a complaint or had experienced a negative reaction from staff when they wished to make a complaint.

*"I was telling the staff I was complaining about this place. They grabbed my notebook and ripped out that piece of paper."*

*"I'd rather not make a complaint... [the staff] would just be more snarly and who are they going to believe, authority or a criminal?"*

“ The staff are always like 'Are you comfortable with this? Do you feel like you are being treated fairly? If you feel like you haven't been treated fairly, call this number'... You have a lot of control over what happens to you. ”

Several residents had literacy challenges which prevented them from reading and understanding the booklets they were given when they arrived at the centre. This in turn meant they were unsure how to proceed when they wanted to make a complaint.

*“I found it really confusing. Most people don’t but I really found it confusing. I wasn’t sure how to do it, and then I had to ask someone.”*

*“We were reading [the complaints form] over and trying to understand because this lady came here to teach me how to fill it out and we were trying to remember how. I don’t know where to sign it and stuff like that.”*

More than a third of young women had made a formal complaint while they were in custody. Among those who had made a complaint, reactions were equally divided about whether their complaint had been taken seriously or not, and about whether making a complaint had led to any changes.

Some young women expressed frustration when changes which were promised as a result of a complaint did not happen immediately. Others were satisfied if they knew change would happen, even if it was not during the time they were in custody, or were content to know that their complaint had been taken seriously and they were treated with respect even if no change occurred as a result.

*“If I make a complaint, for sure the staff would listen. They know my opinion matters. I’ve made a lot of changes since I’ve been in this place. The lifers, we get to make big changes here.”*

In addition to talking about the complaints process specifically, young women talked about their level of input into decisions at the centre. A quarter reported that they felt their ideas had been listened to and taken on by staff through suggestions they had made at residents’ meetings or Youth Advisory meetings. Others explained that they had to earn the privilege of going to Youth Advisory meetings and had not achieved this yet.

*“I make suggestions at the Youth Advisory meetings. It’s to make things better in this place, and yeah they do care about what we have to say. They do listen and try and make this place better.”*

*“Unit meetings are good, you just mention things that could be better and that they could get and we all talk it over.”*

A couple of youth with experience of other centres felt they had greater control over their environment at Prince George or Victoria than at Burnaby.

*“In Victoria we didn’t have to ask to use everything. We had a shelf with paper, pencils, books, and all that kind of stuff, word searches, and you only really had to ask to go outside. And you could go outside when you asked, they just had to call control and say.”*

“Most of the time they listen. I found out here, if you wanna get things done, you gotta do it in a mature, patient way.”

# Returning to the community

## Leaving custody

In 2007, many young women were conflicted about leaving custody because it had often provided safe respite from a chaotic life, where they were able to be substance free and build healthy relationships with positive adult role models. The same was true in this study with around half feeling excited and half having very mixed emotions or not wanting to leave.

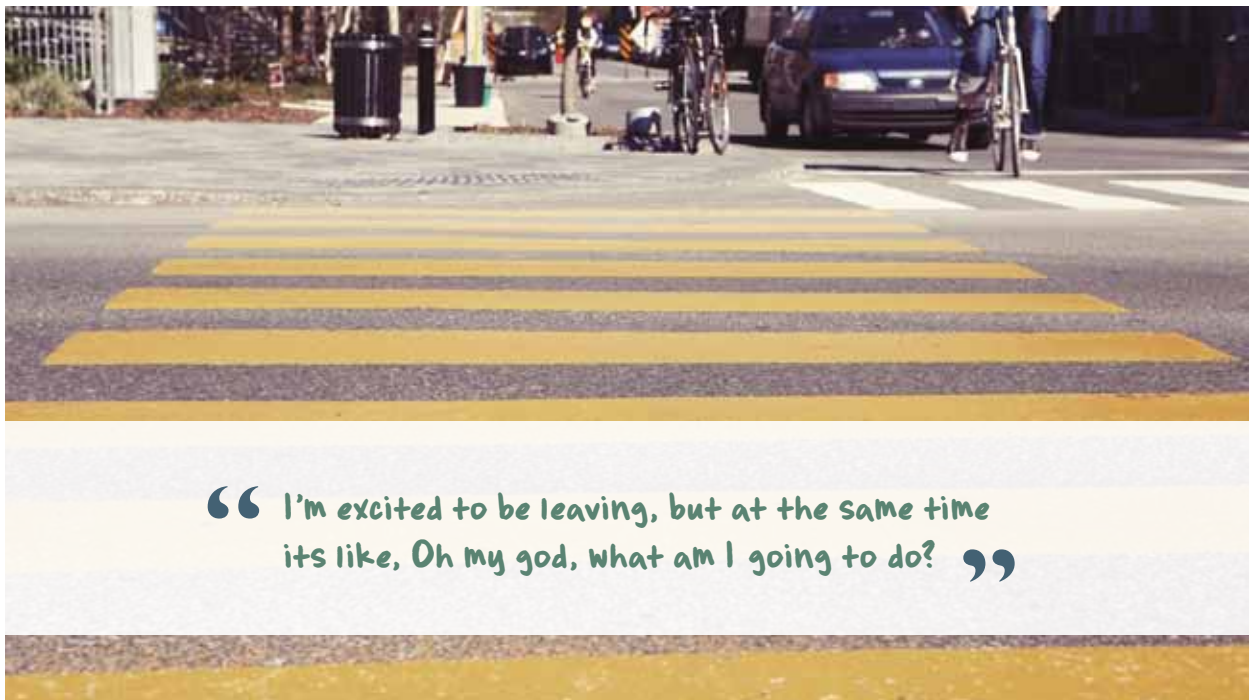
*“I don’t want to return to custody, but at the same time, I like it in here.”*

As in 2007, those who were discharged without much notice struggled with the fact that they had been unable to say goodbye to staff and other residents whom they cared about. About 1 in 4 reported that they had less than 24 hours notice of their release. Those on remand had often been to

court expecting to return to custody and reported being shocked and unprepared when they were discharged from the courtroom without the opportunity to say goodbye or collect their belongings from the custody centre.

Young women serving longer sentences appreciated that they knew the release date they were working towards and were able to prepare accordingly.

*“If I get sentenced to 2 months then I’ll know in 2 months I’ll be released, but if it’s remand the custody centre doesn’t get any notice that I’m going to be getting released that day. Completely all up to the judge so when I go to court I’m either leaving or I’m going back. It’s why I hated being on remand.”*



“ I’m excited to be leaving, but at the same time it’s like, Oh my god, what am I going to do? ”

## Transition plan

Youth were asked if they had a transition plan in place for their release and if they had received support to develop their plan. As in 2007, responses were mixed. At the time they were interviewed in custody, some said they had refused help, others said no one had spoken to them about making a plan yet, while others spoke of their gratitude for the support they were receiving from centre staff, probation officers, family, foster parents, partners, and youth workers in assisting them to develop a plan for their release.

When interviewed in custody, just over a third either reported that they did not have a plan or that their personal plan was to return to the behaviour that had brought them into custody.

*“I’ll probably be homeless again. I won’t step foot in a foster home, so I probably will come back here. I already know I am [coming back to custody] ‘cause I don’t wanna be alone on Christmas.”*

*“There is [a plan], but I don’t really follow through with them. They’re their plans. They don’t really want to listen to my plans because I just want to deal meth, do dope, do what I’m doing. They don’t want to listen to that.”*

The remaining youth interviewed in custody were all able to articulate their transition plans. These were varied and included returning to school, entering a substance use treatment program, and completing probation or community service requirements. While a few had very concrete plans such as hairdressing school or entry into a trades program, the majority had vaguer plans such as finding employment or returning to education.

*“What’s my transition plan? Follow probation, stay away from people who get me into trouble and stop drinking. That’s the reason I get in trouble. I also think a transition house would be good after leaving, somewhere to live and work. A work program would be good.”*

Among the youth without a positive transition plan in place at the time of the first interview, four were living in the community when contacted for a follow-up interview, nine were known to have returned to custody, and the others could not be located.

Of the nine who had returned to custody, four participated in a follow-up interview. One youth who had returned to custody felt that a transition plan to enter drug treatment had been imposed on her. She reported, *“I followed the plan. I was pretty damn close. I went to the program. I came back and then I got breached for being an hour late for curfew.”* The remainder had not attempted to follow any type of positive plan.

Of the four who initially did not have a transition plan and who had not returned to custody, three said a plan had been developed for them by their probation officer before they left custody but they had not followed it because they did not feel their voice was included in it. These youth were continuing to engage in risky behaviours and felt they were at risk of returning to custody. One was street homeless as a result of refusing to go to the foster home arranged by her probation officer for when she was released.

The one young woman who was successfully living in the community who had initially said she did not have a transition plan reported that she had later made a transition plan with support from her probation officer, Aboriginal support worker at the centre, and the centre’s drug and alcohol counsellor.

“ I’m not going to sit there and listen to whatever someone else wants me to do. I don’t have plans. ”



*“The native lady there she kinda helped me out a little bit with planning on getting out, my drugs and alcohol counsellor also. They just told me if you’re going to make decisions to come back that’s your choice. My P.O. was a big one in my life there, she helped me get back into the community also.”*

Youth who had a transition plan developed while in custody reported varying levels of input.

*“I just found out about [the transition plan] the other day. I can’t call my P.O. while I’m here. And I can’t call the group home, I can’t meet with them. So I’m going to that place I don’t know anyone. If I was in Victoria maybe they’d come visit me before and I’d get to meet them and I can decide if I want to do it or not but it’s kind of weird.”*

*“What happens to me isn’t really my issue because I’m in foster care right now.”*

Youth who reported that they had received assistance with their transition plan reported that they had input into the plan from probation officers, drug and alcohol counsellors, Aboriginal Elders, staff at their group home, social workers, family, and custody staff.

*“I’ll be going to AA meetings. They help you set up an AA meeting where you are back home. School, I can take back home what work I did here.”*

*“I have a plan. My lawyer and my P.O. are helping me with it.”*

Youth who struggled to follow their transition plan and returned to custody attributed this to returning to previous unhealthy behaviours, romantic partners, and peer groups despite their plan not to, or to being unable or unwilling to follow the conditions of their probation.

*“I was planning on staying clean. I made this letter before I left like saying that I wanted to stay clean and I was going to read it out to [my boyfriend], but I ended up reading it out to him after we got high. If he had told me that he wanted to get clean I would have.”*

Suggestions for improving transitions back into the community included allowing young women more of a choice as to where to go for treatment or where they would live, including which group home they would stay at or what community they would go to; allowing young women to visit the place where they will be discharged to; and imposing realistic probation conditions which young women could follow.

Having input into their plan was something youth felt was vital because it increased their confidence that they would succeed, and they were more invested to make it work.

“ That plan was my idea. I want to do it, but also the courts have been trying to force recovery on me for a long time and I never really wanted to go and this time I think I have a good chance because it’s my time to say that I want to go. ”

## Reintegration leaves

Most young women reported that they did not have reintegration leaves while in custody, with several of those interviewed not knowing what these were. For those who did access them, the leaves were considered a helpful part of the transition back to community life. Examples provided by the youth included outings to AA meetings and recreational trips such as to the movies.

Young women from outside the Lower Mainland who were serving longer sentences felt that they missed out on the opportunity for reintegration leaves which would have helped them to get re-established in the community.

Young women who had previously stayed at Victoria and Prince George reported that it was harder to go back to their home community for reintegration leave from Burnaby. They found this frustrating because they saw local youth going out on these types of leave.

*“Reintegration leave happened a lot more in Victoria. [At Burnaby] girls from the Island can’t go out locally looking for jobs and stuff the way they could on the Island.”*

“ Reintegration leaves give you something to work for in jail, especially if you’re there for a while, you can work towards being able to go out and do something. ”

## Life after custody

Of the 23 young women who participated in a follow-up interview, 11 reported that they had made positive changes in their lives and were successfully reintegrated back into community life. Seven had returned to custody, and the remainder were still in the community but appeared at risk of returning to custody. For example, one young woman who felt she might return to custody said:

*“I didn’t want to go back to [my home community]. I wanted to go to treatment when I got out but they said I didn’t need it and I said how do you know I don’t? How do you know I’m not going to go out into the community and ‘bang’ I’m back on probation—[Someone] cancelled my drug and alcohol counsellor. So it was pretty crazy. I wasn’t allowed to go back to school because of things that happened. That upset me ‘cause I wanted to go back to school. It’s hard being back. It reminds me of my old life every single day.”*

The young women who reported having successfully reintegrated into the community reported positive circumstances such as being sober, returning to school, doing voluntary work, having a stable home, successfully completing probation, and no longer engaging in criminal behaviour.

When asked what had helped them to stay out of custody, all of them reported that they had decided it was time to make a positive change in their life. Four youth spoke about quitting alcohol or other drugs, and replacing the behaviours they associated with substance use with more positive ones. The remainder discussed the presence of supportive relationships which had helped them to make positive changes. These included family, foster parents, a romantic partner, and their own child, as well as group home workers, social workers, and probation officers.

Probation officers who supported young women to stay in the community were praised. A few young women were grateful that when they had breached their probation soon after being discharged from custody, such as by being late for a curfew, their probation officer had been reasonable and worked with them to ensure it did not happen again rather than sending them back to custody.

The support they had received from custody centre staff and the programming was also considered to have been helpful in preparing youth to successfully reintegrate into community life.

*“I did a lot of NA in Burnaby and a lot of the staff there was really cool and they helped me out a lot with a lot of the things that I was trying to accomplish. When I got out I just thought in my head, I don’t want to be that person anymore, that’s not me. Drugs took over my life and it’s just not me.”*

*“The staff for sure taught me more about self-control and how to be able to stand up for yourself, and obviously they taught me discipline. Honestly I couldn’t have asked for better staff ‘cause they taught me a lot and if it wasn’t for them I’d probably be going still in and out of custody. They gave me motivation to actually come out here and do something about my life. They knew I had an addiction, they knew I was doing stupid shit to get money, like whatever. I was an open book to them and they just filled the book with great things.”*

A few youth reported that after serving multiple sentences in youth custody, they had decided to change their behaviour because they were turning 19 years old and did not want to go to adult prison.

*“I’m an adult now and I can’t screw things up. I can’t do stupid things anymore.”*

The majority of youth who were doing well in the community reported that they had a concrete transition plan in place when they left custody. Most reported that they had been able to have input into their plan and had been supported by adults in their lives to develop and follow the plan. The remainder said their transition plan included attending mandatory drug treatment, and although they had not had input into this plan, they had benefited from it.

Whether youth were doing well or struggling in the community, they talked about the difficulties of transitioning back to community life without the structure and support of the custody centre. Among those who had returned to custody, there was a belief that their problems in the community had stemmed from a lack of structure, routine, and supportive adults.

*“It’s overwhelming. Last time I was in for three months. It’s hard for me to get up for school. I don’t have the structure that I had at Burnaby but you get used to it after a while.”*

Another challenge youth faced was dealing with the stigma of having served time in a Youth Custody Centre or of being known in their home community for their past criminal behaviour. Young women also reported finding it harder to disassociate from previous peer groups and behaviours than they had imagined it would be.

Suggestions from young women about what would make it easier to remain in the community focused on the need for structure, supportive adults, and a positive peer group. They also identified the need for transitional services which would allow young women to continue to develop and use skills they had learned in custody.

“It’s more stressful on the outs. I don’t have someone telling me when to get up. I have to do that for myself and it is hard. I worry I will screw up. There’s more chance of that on the outs.”

## YOUTH CUSTODY SERVICES' RESPONSE TO THE DATA

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A draft of this report was shared with BC Youth Custody Services, and specifically the Burnaby Youth Custody Centre. It was also shared with the sheriff's department, who are responsible for transporting youth to Burnaby. As a result of this, a number of changes have been made to the services and programs offered to young women who enter custody. Youth Custody Services provided the following response for inclusion in this report.

Youth Custody Services serves youth between the ages of 12 and 17 years who have been placed in custody as a result of a court order, hence the service is by definition “involuntary.” Client profile research conducted over the past 5 years clearly demonstrates that the majority of youth in our care have histories of trauma and are impacted by mental health and substance use issues (which contribute to violent behaviour both in the community and in the custody setting). This client profile research reinforces the need for our organization to consider our program (broadly defined) within the context of a trauma-informed care model. While there are some limits on the extent trauma-informed practice can be implemented within a custody environment due to the mandated and involuntary nature of the service, Youth Custody Services is committed to reviewing our training, human resources practices, program delivery, operational policies and youth and family engagement strategies to make changes that will improve the service from a trauma-informed perspective.

To that end, in 2012, Youth Custody Services undertook Organizational Trauma-Informed Practices Self-Assessments at each of the 3 youth custody centres in BC (Victoria, Burnaby and Prince George). The self-assessment process provided a consistent and systemic method to critically examine services. In addition to highlighting organizational strengths, it assisted us to objectively determine where improvements were needed. Based on the assessment results, with funding support from Justice Canada, a work plan was developed, providing a “road map” for the organization to use as a guide to shift practice and operations in several areas and to further build upon existing strengths with respect to trauma-informed practice. These actions, which align with the Ministry's vision, are a priority for the service, and are part of the Youth Custody Service's Strategic Plan for the next several years. Our focus on continuing to implement evidence-informed services that are strengths-based, gender-sensitive and culturally responsive are critical parts of the foundation from which we will further enhance trauma-informed practice. These steps include the delivery of staff training and education to support understanding of the impact of trauma on the behaviour of youth in custody and how to apply the principles of trauma-informed practice in our work with youth and families, continued delivery of the Therapeutic Crisis Intervention model and appropriate use of restraint, a focus on youth and family engagement strategies, review and update to the organization mission, vision and principles statements, review of key job descriptions to incorporate trauma-informed practice language, skills and competencies, and inclusion of service providers, youth and families in continued dialogue regarding service improvements. The next steps for Youth Custody Services will also involve the implementation of an evidence-based, trauma-informed incentive program in fiscal year 15/16. Trauma-informed practice is inherently gender and culturally responsive.

The centralization of services for girls to Burnaby Youth Custody Services began in 2008 with secure custody services being delivered solely at BYCS. Further centralization occurred in April 2012 with all open custody services for girls being moved to BYCS, with the occasional housing of girls for up to seven days in Prince George.

Centralization of services has been supported by a further decline in the average daily count as indicated below:

- FY 10/11= 22                      • FY 12/13= 13.2                      • FY 14/15 to Oct.29th = 10.7
- FY 11/12= 15.7                      • FY 13/14= 12.6

The research and evaluations completed by the McCreary Centre Society, including this evaluation of the experiences of girls in custody, continue to inform our next steps and assist to improve the services we provide. Also, internal quality improvement processes are in place and seek feedback with supporting local corrective action plans developed in response to the feedback from youth and families (e.g., youth and family feedback surveys, Youth Advisory Meetings, unit meetings, complaints processes, etc.). A fulsome response and action plan will be developed to respond to the specific feedback of the girls who have participated in this evaluation.

**Preliminary improvements for girls at Burnaby Youth Custody Services include the following:**

- Established a video visiting program and visitation support program providing financial assistance for families of female youth in custody at Burnaby. All applications made to date have been approved for funding support. The video visiting technology introduced in 2013 has not been well utilized however there has been a steady increase in use to communicate with family and professionals in their lives.
- Extended visit times for visitors outside of the Lower Mainland continue to be available and youth are supported to access their cellphone to retrieve key contact information.
- The MOU established with the BC Sheriff Service in 2012 to support expedited movement of female youth to Burnaby has been reviewed and adjusted on semi-annual basis to address identified concerns. The majority of female youth have been moved via flights directly to Burnaby, with exceptions made for youth who could not fly for medical reasons or fear of flying.
- Specific adjustments made regarding transportation involve:
  - Adjusting the color of female clothing to minimize visibility of girls during transport.
  - Collaborated with the BC Sheriff Service on the development of a memorandum in late 2012 to support case by case assessment of the level of restraint to be applied during transportation, to wear civilian clothing where possible and use other strategies to minimize visibility of the restraints (e.g. covering hand restraint with a sweatshirt, ensuring all passengers have exited the plane before disembarking, etc.).
  - The BC Sheriff Service is currently reviewing the use of metal leg restraints and alternative available tools.
- The larger number of female youth now residing at Burnaby has allowed the centre to offer more group programming, with increased interest from female volunteers.
- With the assistance of Aboriginal consultants, the Aboriginal Learning Park at the centre was redesigned and landscaped by residents. Upgrades include the replacement of the chain link fence with a wooden fence built by residents using traditional techniques, informational panels about Aboriginal culture, and laying of new sod for the landscaped walkway which provided a learning and work experience for involved youth.

- Programs and services were enhanced for female youth in custody to include physical plant enhancements to the girls' living units based on youth feedback and participation, dedicated female Chaplaincy support to provide journaling, art projects, Girls' groups and the quarterly newsletter created by youth for youth, dedicated medical services include a female doctor offering a regular group session on the topic of sexual health, access to additional programs such as First Aid, planting of traditional Aboriginal herbs and traditional cooking classes, spring planting and harvesting of vegetables which are used in centre cooking, continued availability of gender specific advocacy services, and purchase of parenting program curriculum.
- Operational adjustments have been made to reduce contact between boys and girls (e.g. clarification of movement procedures to ensure male residents are moved and secured before movement of female residents, location of programs for girls is in areas away from the rotunda (main school program area) and entire school schedule was adjusted, use of the washroom in the rotunda area is now more closely supervised and locked when not in use, etc.).
- Centre management are encouraging all unit staff to conduct a group check-in with the residents when they begin their shift. The purpose of the check-in is to ask how everyone is feeling and set expectations for the shift, in the hope of identifying and reducing bullying. Mediation is regularly employed when conflict is noticed between residents or residents and staff.
- Operational adjustments have been made to improve confidentiality of health care requests to allow youth to seal their completed health care request form in an envelope and hand it directly to a nurse who visits the unit daily and to reiterate confidentiality requirements for staff. Staff are also encouraged to contact health services directly to ensure quick response for emergent health care requests from youth.
- Reviewed drug detection strategies to include the random use of a sniffer dog, to compare best practice with other jurisdictions, enhance inspection processes of common areas, and post new signage for visitors to the centre regarding contraband. Substance use counselling continues to be available to provide education on the risks associated with ingestion of random drugs.
- All youth have access to water in their rooms. Dixie cups were provided in summer of 2014 for youth to access water more easily for outside activities and paper cups are also available on the units through staff. The centre is currently seeking a supplier who can produce suitable water bottles for use in the centre. An outdoor fountain is also functional in the outdoor courtyard area.
- Continued review of intake and service planning procedures to support youth-centred practice include an update to the youth orientation materials to include youth feedback and art, rights information, the new mission and vision statements, family visitation supports, and confidentiality provisions.
- Monthly Youth Advisory Meetings (YAM) were adjusted to allow a portion of the meeting to be identified for female only issues.
- Community reintegration activities continue to be assessed on an individual basis and according to the specific needs of the youth (e.g. tattoo removal). Opportunities to access services in the local community in preparation for their return to their home community (e.g. clothing, identification, AA/NA groups) are offered, along with end of sentence reintegration leaves to attend required programs or services.



# Summary

The young women who participated in this project had experienced past trauma, disadvantage, and abuse. Despite these experiences, they were willing to engage in sometimes lengthy interviews about their time in custody and to offer their perspective on the experience of young women serving custodial sentences in British Columbia.

They were able to articulate what they felt was working well within custody services, including:

- ◆ Programming that was useful while in custody and also taught interpersonal, employment, educational, and life skills which could be used by youth to successfully reintegrate into their community.
- ◆ Health care that was comprehensive, generally to a higher standard than what young women had received in the community, and which respected their confidentiality.
- ◆ Mental health and substance use support which was easy to access, carried no stigma, and was helpful to many residents.
- ◆ A sensitive and respectful approach to pat downs and searches which made these processes feel as safe as possible for young women with a history of trauma.
- ◆ Care was mostly provided by female staff, and when this was not possible the interactions with male staff were generally positive.
- ◆ Staff acted as positive role models for residents and were a source of support.
- ◆ Volunteers and others who worked in the centre, such as the pastor, also provided support to youth.
- ◆ Unlike in 2007, incidents of male residents harassing female residents were rare.

The young women also made suggestions and observations which showed where Youth Custody Services could make improvements. These included:

- ◆ Ensuring young women with literacy challenges can access the complaints procedure and health care services without the need to submit a handwritten form.
- ◆ Ensuring there is no opportunity for sexual contact between male and female residents when they are in shared spaces.
- ◆ Developing programs and surveillance of residents to reduce bullying, racism, and discrimination.
- ◆ Training staff to ensure residents' confidentiality is maintained at all times.
- ◆ Reviewing the presence of male staff during restraint of female residents.
- ◆ Working with the sheriff's department to find alternatives to transporting young women in shackles on public flights.
- ◆ Allowing young women greater access to drinking water.
- ◆ Offering young women input into their transition plan so they feel their voice is included.
- ◆ For as long as young women continue to be remanded or sentenced to very short stays at the custody centre, offering positive programming and other services which young women can participate in, even if only for a few days.

## Summary

One of the main purposes of this study was to look at the experience of young women from outside the Lower Mainland who would previously not have been placed at Burnaby Youth Custody Centre. Young women with experiences of other centres generally preferred the familiarity and size of those centres to Burnaby, although they liked the additional programs that were available to them at Burnaby.

For some, Burnaby felt a long way from home, and it was challenging for them to stay connected to their family, culture, and community, particularly as they were unable to take advantage of reintegration leaves. There was also some concern that recruitment into gangs or sexual exploitation may have been occurring and that young women from small towns might be at particular risk. There were reports of some young women attempting to recruit others, although no youth reported they had actually joined a gang or become involved in sexual exploitation, and none were aware of anyone this had happened to.

One young woman who participated in this project passed away shortly after being released from custody. Prior to her release when asked what would help her to stay out of custody, she said ***"All you need is someone to listen, a home, and enough money."*** When the first *Listening to young women's voices* was released in 2007, Youth Custody Services did listen and made a number of changes to the ways services were delivered including the separation of male and female living units, and changes to the complaints process. These changes have paid dividends, with reductions in young women reporting negative experiences with male staff or residents; more young women accessing needed mental health supports; improvements in feelings of safety; and increased knowledge, trust and access to the complaints process. It is hoped that the experiences and suggestions of young women who participated in this project can have a similar positive impact.



ARTWORK BY A YOUNG WOMAN WHO STAYED AT BYCS



