

## ***Girls talk about life in BC custody centre***

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Between July 2012 and April 2014, McCreary Centre Society interviewed 57 girls aged 13-19 at the Burnaby Youth Custody Centre. The aim was to speak to young women following the further centralization of custody services for girls to Burnaby. Twenty-three young women also participated in follow-up interviews and discussed factors that were successfully buffering them from returning to custody, or circumstances that contributed to their return to custody.

Young women discussed their experiences with transportation, intake to the centre, maintaining contact with family and friends, the separation of male and female youth within the centre, health concerns and services, and transitioning back into the community.

The study showed that around a third of the young women interviewed in custody were serving their first sentence, and more than half had been in custody three or more times.

For many of the young women interviewed, custody was a positive experience where they had respite from chaotic and difficult lives, had the opportunity to reflect on their past behaviour, received access to much needed health care and addiction services, caught up on schooling, and learned new skills which they could use when they returned to the community.

However, young women who had to travel from outside the Lower Mainland to Burnaby, following the closures of girls facilities at Prince George and Victoria, also reported a number of challenges as a result, including separation from their home community, reduced family visits, and negative experiences while being held in police cells and when shackled during transport.

The Ministry of Children and Family Development's Youth Custody Services has responded to the findings in the report by taking steps to address the concerns raised and has confirmed their commitment to continue to improve the services and care provided to female youth in custody. A Ministry response outlining their improvements is included in the report.

Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary Centre Society who carried out the study said: *"Some of the stories we heard about the lives these girls have led were heartbreaking, yet most of them took full responsibility for the mistakes they had made, were grateful for the support they received to address the challenges in their lives, and had some great suggestions for how things could be improved. We were able to share their ideas with senior managers at Youth Custody Services, and are optimistic that the girls' voices are being incorporated into planning for programming and services."*



*McCreary Centre Society is a non-government, non-profit organization committed to improving the health of BC youth through research and community-based projects.*

*Founded in 1977, the Society sponsors and promotes a wide range of activities and research to address unmet health needs of young people.*

### ***Contact***

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A copy of the report which is titled "*Listening to Young Women's Voices II*," can be obtained at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca). The report will be launched at the McCreary Centre Society AGM on November 18th at 6pm.

Webinar presentations of the findings are scheduled for Nov. 20th at 9am, Nov. 24th at 3pm and Nov. 27th at noon. – details are available at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca).

## **BACKGROUND**

McCreary Centre Society is a BC based not-for-profit committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation, youth leadership initiatives and community engagement projects.

In 2007, McCreary conducted its first in-depth study of girls in custody. 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 and McCreary began interviewing girls about their experiences.

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, including access to mental health and substance use support.
- 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 generally 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 restraints 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.