

## ***Helping troubled teens get back on track*** ***New report profiles BC youth in custody***

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Many youth who find themselves in custody in British Columbia come from difficult and chaotic backgrounds, and have a long history of involvement with the police and justice system. Yet a new report released today by the McCreary Centre Society shows that the support of caring adults, and the educational opportunities and healthier lifestyle that the custody system provides, can make a positive difference in the lives of these young people.

One hundred and fourteen youth ages 12 to 19 were surveyed while in custody between August 2012 and January 2013 in British Columbia. This is the third time McCreary Centre Society has surveyed youth in custody.

*“There have been a few positive changes since we last surveyed youth in custody in 2004,”* said Annie Smith, Executive Director of McCreary Centre Society. *“We are seeing fewer youth in custody who have used marijuana, and fewer who have driven after drinking, but in other areas we have seen no differences. We still find that Aboriginal youth and youth who have been in government care are vastly over-represented, as well as those with FASD and mental health challenges.”*

Smith added, *“When we compare youth in custody to same-age youth who completed McCreary’s school-based Adolescent Health Survey, the differences in backgrounds between the two groups are striking. Young people who end up in custody have often suffered significant trauma, including the death of a close family member or friend, suicide within their family, parental involvement with the justice system, homelessness, and unbelievably high rates of abuse.”*

Recognising this, Youth Custody Services in BC are moving towards a trauma-informed practise model, and there are definite signs that this will be an encouraging step forward. The study showed that youth who felt an adult connected to the custody centre cared about them were more likely to report better physical and mental health, as well as to think this would be their last time in custody, and to have positive plans for pursuing education or job opportunities when released.

In responding to the report, Minister of Children and Family Development Stephanie Cadieux stated *“The Time Out III results reinforce our emphasis on staff developing supportive relationships with these vulnerable kids so we can improve their chances of success as they reintegrate into their communities. Research like this helps us to continuously improve services we provide for children and their families.”*

Ninety percent of youth in custody had been suspended or expelled from school in the community, and 78% had dropped out, yet most reported that they liked



*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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school in custody, were making progress in school, and felt that staff at the custody school cared about them and treated them fairly. Youth with FASD (who often struggle to learn in a mainstream classroom) were among those who found most valuable the life skills programs and educational opportunities received in custody.

While relationships within the custody system are clearly important, other factors that were linked to youth's plans for not returning to custody included maintaining ties with their home community and family, having healthy peer relationships, and gaining a positive skill.

A copy of the report which is titled "*Time Out III: A profile of BC youth in custody*" can be obtained at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca). Webinar presentations of the findings are scheduled for August 27<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup> – details are available at [www.mcs.bc.ca](http://www.mcs.bc.ca).

**NEW WEBINAR DATES ADDED:** Sept 10th at 9am and 2pm, 12th at 9.30am, 17th at 9.30am and 18th at 3.30pm.

If you experience technical difficulties joining a presentation, please contact [Duncan@mcs.bc.ca](mailto:Duncan@mcs.bc.ca)

## **BACKGROUND**

This is the third time McCreary Centre Society has surveyed youth in custody. Previous surveys were conducted in 2000 and 2004.

The survey provides decision makers and others with an interest in youth health with information on the health picture of young people in custody in BC, as well as essential information about health trends, and about risk and protective factors that can influence young people's healthy transitions to adulthood.

The survey is designed to consider emerging youth health issues, and to track trends over time, as well as youth's specific experiences in custody. The survey included 145 questions asking youth about their perceptions of their current physical and emotional health, risky behaviours and health promoting practices. Healthy development for youth includes many contributing factors and the survey also asks about broader issues such as feelings of safety, relationships and engagement in a variety of activities.

### **Time Out III: A selection of key findings**

Youth in custody experienced very challenging life circumstances in their formative years, including high rates of housing instability, family problems, bereavement, abuse, and victimization, as well as challenges at school. For example, most youth (87%) had at least one person they were close to who had died, including losing someone to violence (34%), suicide (32%), and overdose (30%).

Seventy percent of youth had at least one family member who was criminally involved, and for 29% of youth, this was a parent. Youth whose family was criminally involved were more likely to be in conflict with the law from an early age.

The health profile of youth in custody is very different from that of youth in mainstream schools. When compared to youth who completed the 2008 BC Adolescent Health Survey, youth in custody were less likely to live with parents, more likely to have been in government care, and more likely to go to bed hungry. A greater percentage of youth in custody also experienced health challenges, such as having a mental health condition, substance use problems, a history of abuse or a history of suicide attempts.

The majority of youth in custody in 2012 (65%) had lived in a foster home, group home, or on a Youth Agreement at some point in their lives, with 32% of youth living in government care at the time they entered the custody centre.

Sixty-five percent of youth in custody reported at least one health challenge. The most common were behavioural problems (48%) and mental or emotional health conditions (26%).

Youth engaged in a range of health risk behaviours before entering custody, including high rates of substance use, and risky sexual behaviour. Some youth also engaged in risk behaviours while in custody, such as misusing someone else's prescription medication.

Aboriginal youth remain over-represented in the youth custody system. However, the focus on Aboriginal programming at Prince George custody centre appears positive, as almost all Aboriginal youth in custody in Prince George found the programming helpful.

Youth who felt connected to their home community were more likely to report having good or excellent health (92% vs. 73% who felt less connected). They were also more likely to think this was their last time in custody (74% vs. 54%) and to see themselves in a job in five years time (75% vs. 49%).

Maintaining contact with family and friends while in custody was an important protective factor. Youth who had visits from family or friends were less likely to report experiencing extreme anxiety, stress, or despair in the past month.

Youth who felt there was an adult connected to the custody centre who cared about them were more likely to rate their health as good or excellent (91% vs. 71% of those who did not feel that an adult connected to the centre cared), as well as to think this would be their last time in custody (75% vs. 53%), to have post-secondary plans (64% vs. 23%), and to have future job aspirations (74% vs. 46%).

**Note:** McCreary has recently completed data collection for the fifth BC Adolescent Health Survey. Surveys were collected from 30,000 BC students aged 12-19. Results will be available this winter.