

VOICES FROM THE INSIDE II

A Next Steps project with youth in Custody



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YOUTH HEALTH ♦ YOUTH RESEARCH ♦ YOUTH ENGAGEMENT

McCreary Centre Society is a non-government not-for-profit committed to improving the health of BC youth through research, evaluation and community-based 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 the province.

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Introduction



In 2013, we released *Time Out III: A profile of BC youth in custody* which shared the results of McCreary’s 2012-2013 Youth in Custody Survey.

Time Out III showed that youth who enter into custody face many challenging life

circumstances including high rates of abuse, unstable family life, victimization and bereavement. Experiences with being in government care, as well as rates of housing instability and mental and emotional health conditions were much higher among youth in custody than we saw among mainstream school populations. These youth also engaged in a range of health risk behaviours including high rates of substance use and risky sexual behaviours.

Despite the challenges they faced, many youth in custody reported feeling strongly connected to their home communities, enjoyed school in custody and had positive aspirations for the future.

These and other key findings from the report were taken back to youth in custody through a two part Next Steps workshop curriculum.

The Next Steps is an interactive workshop series where youth have the opportunity to respond to the results of McCreary’s youth health research and develop projects to address important health issues. Next Steps workshops have been implemented in diverse communities across BC and involved young people in mainstream schools, as well as youth from marginalized populations including Aboriginal youth and youth who are street involved. For more details visit www.mcs.bc.ca.

In August 2013, we conducted ten workshops with around 50 participants across the three BC youth custody centres. Through trivia games, group discussions and interactive activities we shared the results of the report. Youth discussed the findings including factors that contribute to young people becoming involved with the criminal justice system, their life in the custody centres, as well as the barriers they face when transitioning back into the community.

TIMELINE

January 2012

Survey developed using questions from previous Youth in Custody survey and new questions of interest to Youth Custody Services.

June–July 2012

Survey pilot tested with youth who had previously served custodial sentences.

August 2012–January 2013

114 youth complete the survey in the 3 BC Youth Custody Centres.

Youth provided suggestions for custody services, social workers, probation officers, and community organizations on how to support youth in conflict with the law and help them stay out of custody.

Once youth had discussed the *Time Out III* report findings, McCreary returned to all three youth custody centres to support a group of youth to pick out the key messages that had come from the ten workshops.

In partnership with Reel Youth (a local non-profit youth film-making organization) young people created four claymation films to share the most important messages to come out of those workshops.

Youth chose to highlight issues such as the need for more individualized probation orders, the importance of healthy relationships in overcoming substance abuse, the effects of discrimination on youth coming out of custody, and the role of independent living skills training in transitioning into the community.



Watch claymation films at www.mcs.bc.ca or www.youtube.com/user/McCrearyCentre.

Background

This is the second time we have conducted a Next Steps workshop program with youth in custody. In 2007, 13 workshops were held to engage youth in the results of the 2004 Youth in Custody Survey (see *Voices from the Inside: Next steps with youth in custody*, 2007). A number of changes were made within the custody centres as a result. These included changes to the complaints procedure, the introduction of gender sensitivity training for staff, and the development of mechanisms for youth to have input into unit and centre decisions.

Since that time, the number of youth who have entered custody has decreased by more than a third, with an average of 85 youth in custody in BC on any given day in fiscal year 2012-2013. Major changes have also occurred within the custody centres including the centralization of services for females to Burnaby. There has also been a focus on providing services and cultural programming for Aboriginal youth in Prince George, and an emphasis on trauma-informed practices in Victoria (which is being further developed at all three centres).

August 2013

Report findings released (*Time Out III*).

August–September 2013

10 Next Steps workshops with youth in custody completed.

October–November 2013

Youth at the 3 centres create claymation films to respond to survey results.

Workshop agenda

Each Next Steps workshop was facilitated by two McCreary staff members and followed a structured agenda, with four to six youth per group. The workshop lasted up to two hours, with most workshops being scheduled for 90 minutes. Six workshops took place in Burnaby (four with

males and two with females), and there were two each in Prince George and Victoria. In total, nearly 50 youth participated. Custody centre staff were not present in Burnaby and Prince George, but were in the room in Victoria.

Introductions & Icebreakers

Facilitators gave some background about McCreary Centre Society, the Youth in Custody Survey, and the *Time Out III* report.

Youth were told that the goals of the workshop were to:

- ▶ Share the results of the *Time Out III* report.
- ▶ Listen to participants comments on the report findings.
- ▶ Collect suggestions on how to better support youth in custody and address some of the findings in the report.

Youth were told that the workshop was voluntary and they could stop participating at any time. Facilitators explained how the information they provided would be used.

A round of personal introductions and some ice breakers followed including a game called "I've never but I'd like to," where youth shared something they had never done but hoped to do someday.

Trivia Game

Using the results of *Time Out III*, facilitators created 16 trivia questions on various statistics and trends included in the report. Youth guessed which multiple choice answer they thought was correct.

For each question, facilitators asked follow-up questions about the answers youth had chosen and facilitated a dialogue around the topic area.

Group Discussion & Suggestions

After a short break, the group came back together to further discuss the concepts and themes that had come up during the trivia game. Youth were then asked for their suggestions on how some of the statistics they had been discussing might be improved.

Next Steps challenges

Not all youth in custody were able to participate in the workshops for reasons including competing health care appointments, and no contact orders with other participants. Among youth who did attend the workshops, some may have felt intimidated to offer alternative opinions to those expressed by other residents. They may also not have felt comfortable sharing their views in the two workshops where staff were present.

Some topics could not safely be explored in every workshop due to tensions between participants or because the topic was not felt to be relevant to the group.

Although an effort was made to make the workshops and material as accessible as possible, some youth may have struggled to comprehend some of the report findings and to fully participate in the discussion surrounding them.

Finally, only a small group of youth from each centre was able to participate in the follow-up claymation film-making workshops. Other youth may not have agreed with the topics these youth chose to focus on as the key findings of the *Time Out III* report.

Despite these challenges, youth's reaction to the workshops was overwhelmingly positive. They participated fully and appeared genuinely engaged and interested in the report findings. They also offered thoughtful insights and suggestions, and reported being pleased to have the opportunity to take part in the Next Steps.



Physical health

81% of youth rated their health as good or excellent.

Before entering custody, more than 1 in 3 slept for 5 hours or less a night.

Some youth in custody felt their health in the community was quite poor. Many felt that they were less healthy in the community than they were in custody because they did not sleep or eat due to using appetite and sleep suppressing drugs. Other youth spoke about how living in poverty prevented them from making what they felt were healthy choices.

When discussing the report findings that showed most youth slept longer on an average night in custody than in the community, some youth agreed with this, while others expressed surprise and commented that they had trouble sleeping in the centres because they were depressed or stressed.

Among youth who felt they had good physical health in the community, they credited eating homemade fresh food and having opportunities to participate in physical activities such as boxing and hockey, or using a community gym.

Suggestions from youth

- ◆ Have more positive activities in the community for youth, including sports, which can improve health and help to prevent boredom.



Mental health

67% of youth reported that they had been diagnosed with a specific condition, such as depression, anxiety, autism or ADHD.

48% reported having a behavioural problem such as Conduct Disorder.

Youth were more likely to indicate accessing health care and mental health services while in custody than their peers in 2004.

Many of the youth who took part in the workshops disclosed they had been diagnosed with a mental health condition. They talked about the challenges of managing conditions such as bipolar disorder, depression and anxiety. For example, some youth said that their condition caused problems in their relationships with other youth because they would become upset and angry easily.

Other youth spoke of difficulties staying in foster homes because their anxiety was too much for their foster parents to cope with or would cause the youth to run away. Youth with Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) spoke about the impact of these conditions on their ability to focus in school.

Youth were not surprised to hear the high rates of ADD/ADHD diagnoses among youth in custody, but felt this was due to the overall prevalence rates of ADD/ADHD diagnoses rather than any link between the conditions and involvement with the criminal justice system.

Many of the youth recognized that they had a behavioural disorder and talked about the challenges they encountered controlling their anger. They identified problems controlling their anger as a contributing factor in their entry into custody. They also spoke of how their inability to control their anger negatively affected their relationships with staff within the custody centre.

Suggestions from youth

- ◆ Offer more support for youth with anger-management problems, such as giving youth a chance to “cool down” after an incident.
- ◆ Teach techniques to help youth find healthy ways of coping with anger and stress.

Nutrition

11% of youth went to bed hungry often or always while they were living in the community.

47% went to bed hungry often or always while in custody.

“I don’t eat a lot of the food [in custody] even if I am hungry.”



Some youth felt that the foods they ate in the community were not healthy, especially when they had to rely on fast food because it was cheap. Others spoke about not having access to fruits or vegetables.

Youth were not surprised at the stats about going to bed hungry. They reported that either this had happened to them or they had heard other youth complaining about going to bed hungry in the community and in custody.

The timing of meals was identified as a major factor in going to bed hungry while in custody. Residents felt their meals were too early in the day. Their last meal was followed by programming which included physical activities, so they were often hungry by the time they went to bed.

Some participants felt that youth might be going to bed hungry because they had their food taken by other residents as a form of victimization.

When Youth Custody Services reviewed the findings from *Time Out III* they added a late night snack to the menu. Some participants had noticed this improvement and confirmed that they now received a snack before bed and were grateful for this addition; others did not feel the new snack was sufficient or complained it was of poor quality.

Many youth said that despite being hungry they would throw away food at meal times because it was pre-made and processed; because they feared eating too many simple carbohydrates like pasta or potatoes was unhealthy; or because the food was too oily or would become soggy sitting in their trays before it was served.

Youth commented about the lack of protein in their diet and suggested that more protein would keep them full longer and would be healthier. They also wanted to see more fresh fruit and vegetables, rather than frozen or canned, and wished there were healthier options available in the canteen.

Others said that portion sizes varied so much that sometimes the portions were so small that they were still hungry, whereas at other times there was more than they could finish.

Youth who were serving longer sentences reported that they became bored with the lack of variety in the meals, although a few noted that they ate better in custody than in the community.

Differences between centres

Youth who had been in multiple centres agreed that Victoria provided good portion sizes and food quality. Youth in Prince George were the most critical of the quality of the food but did like that all units had bread, peanut butter and jam available at all times.

At the time of the Next Steps workshops, Prince George had begun redesigning their food menus with the youths' input, as well as having residents create the menu for their Christmas Day dinner.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Offer more homemade meals made with fresher ingredients and more protein.
- ✦ Offer second helpings.
- ✦ Provide the nutritional information for everything that is served.
- ✦ Post up-to-date menus each week.
- ✦ Have food available on all units (as happens in Prince George).
- ✦ Have a nutritionist available for males and females.
- ✦ Provide more opportunities for youth to cook meals for their unit.

“I wish they had a schedule for the food so we know what we’re eating.”

“Healthier and homemade meals.”



Substance use

69% of youth reported having used prescription pills without a doctor's consent.

Youth across all the workshops talked about the link between their substance use problems and criminal involvement, and females identified a direct link between addiction and entering custody.

Most youth were not surprised by the rising rates of prescription pill use, saying that prescription pills were cheap and readily available in the community. They were also used in the custody centres because it was easier to get access to other residents' medications than to other substances.

Young people often used prescription pills recreationally in custody to manage boredom, while others talked about using them to manage physical or emotional pain. They identified barriers to accessing health care as a reason for using other residents' medications. These barriers included a doctor not being in the centre at the time or having trouble filling in a health care request form, where these are required.



Substance use treatment while in custody

Most youth thought it was easy to get help with substance use issues while in custody. Drug and alcohol counsellors were readily available and made proactive contact with youth when they arrived in custody. Many said they found the drug and alcohol counsellors approachable and helpful. They appreciated that the counsellors would speak to them about issues not related to substance use. They also liked that they could sometimes stay connected to the counsellors when they were back in the community.

A group of female youth in Burnaby chose to make their claymation film about substance use treatment in custody. They felt that group supports such as Narcotics Anonymous (NA) and Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) were important, and wanted to see these offered more often in the centres. They felt that sharing their own story, and listening to youth with similar experiences, was incredibly helpful in their recovery and healing process.



Claymation film created by female youth in Burnaby.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Offer nicotine gum or patches to youth who are quitting smoking while in custody, as withdrawal can lead youth to become irritable and behave aggressively.
- ✦ Have substance use support groups like NA/AA available at least once a week.

84% of youth who accessed substance use programs while in custody found them helpful.

Access to health care

56% of youth had been injured seriously enough to need medical attention in the year before entering custody.

Youth discussed accessing health care while in the community. Some felt there were not many services available to them in their home community. This was particularly true for youth from small towns who felt that their only option for health care was the emergency room. This was problematic if they had a difficult relationship with health care providers.

“Every time I go to the hospital they won’t admit me.”

Youth from larger urban centres felt that there were health care services available to them but most did not know how to access them. This was particularly true for youth who were not in school, or who rarely attended, and therefore did not get access to the same health care information as their peers.

“Everything people need [for health care] they can access, they just don’t know how.”

65% had not used a condom or other barrier the last time they had sex.

Sexual health

Youth reported that free condoms were widely available in their home community, in clinics, and in their probation officer or social worker’s offices.

The availability of sexual health services within the custody centre resulted in several youth being diagnosed with a Sexually Transmitted Infection (STI), and some females discovering they were pregnant. For some youth their first STI test had happened upon entering the custody centre.

Accessing health care in custody

Young people were positive about the health care they received in custody. However, they noted that there were significant barriers to accessing care if they had to fill out a health care request form, including literacy challenges. Youth who had to pass a health care request form to a unit staff for it to be processed felt embarrassed that the staff read the form, so would wait until their health condition got worse before seeking help. A few youth were concerned about the length of time it took to process a health care form.

Youth reported that sometimes unit staff would discuss youths' health issues with other staff. As a result, residents did not feel safe submitting forms to go to health care, or would be untruthful about their reason for needing to access health care.

Keeping health information confidential was a particular concern for female youth. Some said they had a few health care staff they trusted and would only receive treatment or submit forms to those staff.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Ensure health care services are available to youth in all BC communities.
- ✦ Make youth more aware of services that are available in their community.
- ✦ Ensure Custody centre staff only have access to the information in a resident's file that is necessary for caring for youth and keeping them safe.
- ✦ Provide confidentiality training for all custody staff including health care staff.
- ✦ Ensure unit staff do not read a youth's health care request form.
- ✦ Train unit staff about various physical and mental health conditions that youth may have, to ensure they respond appropriately.



Involvement with the criminal justice system

Youth with a family member who had a criminal record were more likely to be in conflict with the law from an early age.

67% of youth for whom both parents had a criminal record had been detained before their 13th birthday.

Youth were not surprised by the statistics that showed youth with criminally involved families were more likely to be in conflict with the law from an early age themselves. Many spoke of how family members' involvement in criminal activities had contributed to their own involvement at a young age.

Many youth felt that they or their peers had ended up in custody because they were living in poverty and felt selling illegal drugs was the only way to support themselves. Youth from smaller communities in BC felt that finding legal employment was a particular problem.

The majority of youth in custody (65%) had been in foster care, in a group home or on a Youth Agreement at some point in their lives. They felt that being in care could be stressful for young people and could often lead to involvement with the criminal justice system as they struggled to follow the rules of a foster home and wanted to live with their biological families.

“I’ve taken care of myself my whole life...so it’s hard to have strict rules [in some foster homes].”

They explained that because they did not like spending time at their foster or group home, they would come home late or run away and breach their curfew. Youth also felt that foster parents were legally required to report youth for breaching the terms of their probation whereas biological family members did not. Some youth thought they would be more successful staying out of custody if they could live more independently, and a few wished that they could be put on a Youth Agreement.

A large number of the youth said that they would be placed in a foster or group home when they left custody. Many felt that their opinions on where they should live were not taken into consideration. They wanted to be offered more support to live with their biological families.

The majority of participants had been in custody previously. These youth felt that discrimination in the community because of their past criminal involvement, or because of their social group, contributed to youth returning to custody. Many youth said they had been denied jobs or access to school programs because of their criminal history.

Youth in Prince George created a claymation film about young people's experiences with discrimination when they left custody. They felt that individuals in the community needed to be aware that youth coming out of custody experienced discrimination that prevented them from finding employment or entering into school programs, and that these barriers contributed to youth returning to custody.

Youth felt that short custodial sentences created problems because they disrupted a young person's life in the community, but were not long enough for them to access services or supports while in custody.

Some youth said that they had only committed one crime but had been in custody many times for breaching their probation. Youth felt that sometimes conditions of their probation were difficult to follow or they did not fully understand them, and they would end up breaching.

58% of youth were in custody for a breach or administration of justice offence.

“If you aren't occupying yourself you'll end up reoffending and end up back in custody.”



Claymation film created by youth in Prince George.



Claymation film created by youth in Burnaby.

Several youth said they had breached curfew because they had missed a bus home. Other youth said that it was difficult for them to adhere to some conditions, for example not being allowed to use public transit.

A group of youth at Burnaby chose to focus their claymation film on the topic of breaching their probation orders. The youth felt this was a major issue in the justice system, as many young people in the centres had been in custody for breaching their probation on multiple occasions. Youth thought that continually coming into custody for short periods of time created barriers to accessing employment or schooling. It also contributed to youth becoming further institutionalized. They felt that probation orders did not take into account the circumstances of the individual or address what youth needed to successfully live in the community.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Support families to provide healthy environments for young people.
- ✦ Make a greater effort to support youth in care to live with their families.
- ✦ Provide more support for young people to live independently, including through Youth Agreements.
- ✦ Allow young people in care to have more input into decisions that affect them, including probation orders and where they live.
- ✦ Assist young people to find legal employment which offers a living wage to prevent them from engaging in illegal activities.
- ✦ Ensure youth understand their probation conditions.
- ✦ Have probation appointments out of office hours so they do not clash with school or work.
- ✦ Consider alternatives to custody rather than sentencing youth for short periods of time.

Programs and activities in custody

School

Participants talked about wanting to use their time in the centres productively to finish school, prepare for post-secondary training or acquire skills to help them find employment in the community.

“I quit school in Grade 7 and now I’m in Grade 10 or 11.”

Youth in all three custody centres enjoyed school in custody, with many seeing it as a chance to get ahead and make up for school time they had missed in the community. They also appreciated school as a way to pass the time productively, and during breaks would often wish school was back on. Youth felt that the small class sizes and the volunteer supports were especially helpful in making school in custody successful for them.

“You can get more done [in school] in custody compared to school in the community.”

Some youth missed their school teachers and former school in the community, while others talked about their problems being in school outside of custody, including the challenges of being at different grade levels for different subjects.

A common concern was that although youth wanted to return to school in the community when they were released, they knew that it was sometimes difficult to secure a place after the school year had started. They appreciated when the centre had helped them set up schooling in the community, or apply for post secondary funding.

39% of youth liked going to school in the community.

64% reported that they liked going to school while in custody.

Youth in 2012 were more likely to go to school in custody than their peers in 2004.

“School makes the day go by fast.”



Differences between centres

Youth felt the school experience was very different in Victoria and Prince George than in Burnaby. They said that learning was more individualized and self-paced in Burnaby, with opportunities to undertake more advanced studies and interesting curriculum.

Youth particularly praised the teaching staff at Burnaby for making the lessons accessible, spending time working through parts of the curriculum that were difficult for them, and encouraging them to ask questions.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Offer individualized learning in all of the custody centres.
- ✦ Be more aware and supportive of the challenges youth experience when they have ADHD.
- ✦ Offer more assistance to youth to prepare them for post-secondary, and help them apply to post-secondary institutions.
- ✦ Have custody staff be more proactive in approaching youth about education opportunities rather than waiting for youth to ask.
- ✦ Support youth who want to attend mainstream schools when they are released (instead of alternative schooling).

Programs

Youth discussed the variety of programs offered to them. These included programs with volunteers to do crafts or play board games, arts and crafts classes, and cultural programming such as learning from an Aboriginal elder. Youth at each centre also spoke highly of the programming they did with the Pastor.

Some youth felt that a lack of programming and leisure activities led to boredom and subsequent behavioural problems, especially during breaks from school. They felt that when there was more programming there tended to be fewer conflicts between residents, as well as between residents and staff.

Some females wished they could do programming with the males while in custody; however others said they did not want to interact with male residents.

Participants found programs that taught independent living skills, such as cooking, to be helpful and enjoyable. They felt they learned practical skills that would help them after custody. Youth were concerned that because of the lower numbers of youth in custody, some of the centres had reduced their life skills programming.

A group of youth in Victoria focused their claymation film on how job and life skills training would help them successfully transition back into their community.

Differences between centres

Youth with experience of more than one custody centre felt that programming varied between custody centres, with Burnaby offering the most useful and varied programming, including a greater selection of programs run by volunteers.

Many youth felt that Prince George had the best Aboriginal programming of the three centres, and most Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth said that they enjoyed taking part. However, some youth felt there was too much focus on Aboriginal programming and that a greater selection of other programs should also be offered.

74% of youth who took part in Life Skills programming reported they found it helpful.

“I learned how to cook here.”



Claymation film created by youth in Victoria.

“It shouldn’t matter how many kids are in custody, they still get bored [when there are no programs].”



Youth in Prince George said they enjoyed activities like drum building and drumming, smudging, and spending time with elders. Youth said they particularly enjoyed the elder teas, where they shared a meal with local elders every two weeks. Youth in secure custody wished they could participate in sweat lodge ceremonies because they were important for healing from past traumas.

Youth in Prince George liked doing programs with their unit staff, especially having cooking lessons outside of program time. They felt this was particularly helpful for preparing young people to live independently. They also really liked a part of the Pastor's programming where the different units get together to play sports and use the gym.

Youth felt that the job training programs at Prince George were particularly good and wished they were offered at the other centres. However, youth at Prince George felt these programs were not easily accessible because many youth were not cleared to leave the centre so could not participate. Youth in Prince George also felt that sometimes they would not get to take part in programming that they were scheduled for because staff decided not to take them, for example if staff decided it was too cold out.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Offer more regular Aboriginal programming for Aboriginal youth.
- ✦ Make sweat lodge ceremonies available to youth in secure custody in Prince George.
- ✦ Offer more diverse cultural programming for youth in Prince George.
- ✦ Have more programming that encourages better relationships and understanding between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal youth.
- ✦ Provide more arts based programming such as painting, pottery and crafts.
- ✦ Offer more volunteer programming, especially in Prince George and Victoria.
- ✦ Provide more trades training, such as landscaping or metal working for females.
- ✦ Have job training that is accessible to all youth in custody.
- ✦ Offer more regular cooking classes, and have opportunities for youth to cook meals for their unit and staff.
- ✦ Offer more programs that help participants to create and follow a budget.
- ✦ Ensure that youth are given an opportunity to take part in scheduled programming and have more input into what programs they attend.

Job training and help finding employment

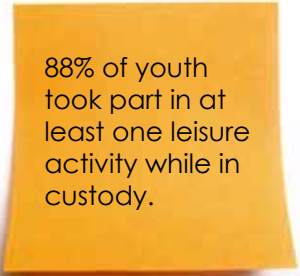
The majority of youth identified job skills training as something they felt should be offered more at the centres. For the most part, youth said they liked the training already offered such as Food Safe, Serving it Right and WHMIS certification, and felt that these could be helpful to them in the future. However, some youth said they did not know what types of jobs the certification qualified them for while in the community, or where to go to apply for jobs.

Females identified job training as programming they would like to see made a priority. Some females also suggested learning interviewing skills, as even if they had job skills, they felt they would not know how to dress or behave at an interview.

58% of youth felt that job training and opportunities would help young people to not re-offend.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Have current training courses available more often, as some youth do not get a chance to take part if their sentence is short.
- ✦ Offer a greater variety of training, especially in the trades (e.g., wood working, metal working and landscaping).
- ✦ Expand the forestry program currently offered at Prince George and the forklift program offered at Burnaby so they are accessible to more youth. Similarly, expand the woodworking program to include more youth across all three centres.
- ✦ Offer job training to youth who are not cleared to leave the centres or who are in secure custody.
- ✦ Ensure youth understand what types of employment the training and certification they have completed are helpful for, and where to go to apply for those types of jobs.
- ✦ Offer greater assistance and support to help youth find employment in the community, including help writing résumés and coaching youth on interview skills.
- ✦ Expand Reintegration Leave to include visits back to youth's home communities and to include youth who are sentenced to secure custody, to allow them to apply for jobs before they leave custody.
- ✦ Offer driver's education classes in the custody centres.



88% of youth took part in at least one leisure activity while in custody.

“I never read on the outs. Now I read a book a day.”

“You can’t play volleyball with two people.”

Leisure activities

The majority of youth said they spent a lot of time reading while they were in custody, and some youth said they had never read a book before entering custody but had read several since being in custody. Participants reported that each centre’s library was well stocked with books that interested them, and there were good opportunities to request books to be ordered in. Youth spoke highly of the librarians in the centres, saying they were helpful and would go out of their way to ensure youth got reading material that they requested.

“[You just] tell the librarian what you want and she’ll get it.”

Many youth enjoyed creative leisure activities while in custody, with the majority saying they enjoyed classes like woodworking, sewing, leather working, as well as art classes such as drawing and painting. Youth were very positive about wood shop, especially in Prince George where they were able to work on large scale group projects that were useful to the centre, such as building the smokehouse where they could smoke salmon and meats.

Youth felt that the small numbers of youth currently in custody created some barriers to participating in outdoor and sport activities. Female residents discussed the challenges of engaging in programs and staying active. Some females played sports in their communities. However, because of the small number of females in custody and the fact that not all youth on their unit enjoyed sports, they found it difficult to be as active as they would like while in custody.

Differences between centres

Youth with experience of more than one centre felt that Burnaby had the best equipped and maintained gym. They felt that Victoria and Prince George did not have a complete gym and it took a long time for broken equipment to be repaired.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Offer more opportunities to use existing equipment such as gym equipment, outdoor obstacle courses and bicycles.
- ✦ Offer youth more input into what activities they take part in and when.
- ✦ Allow youth to pay for books themselves if the centres cannot order them.
- ✦ Offer more variety of sports for youth to engage in such as playing hockey or boxing training.
- ✦ Allow youth access to free weights while in custody.
- ✦ Offer more opportunities to make things that are useful for the centers (e.g., through woodshop).
- ✦ Improve outdoor spaces like courtyards to make them more pleasant to be in, such as by removing bee hives.
- ✦ Provide more outdoor activities that do not require teams.
- ✦ Widen the running track at Burnaby so that youth feel less cramped running with other people on it.

“I go to [the courtyard] and track every time it’s offered.”



Rights in custody



42% of youth did not know that they had a right to look at their personal information on file.

Many youth said they had not received an orientation to their rights when they came into the centre. Some said that they had received an orientation the first time they entered custody, but not when they returned subsequently, and they had forgotten its content.

Youth felt that when the orientation occurred it was inconsistent as some youth were given a book to read, others watched a DVD and others had used a computer program as part of their orientation. Some youth said their orientation had not covered their rights but had focused on the centre's rules.

While youth were familiar with many of their rights in custody, very few knew that they had the right to look at their personal file. Some youth said they had been refused access to their file when they had asked.

Youth also said that although they had a right to know why they were being searched, sometimes staff would not tell them, but other youth felt that staff would tell them if they asked.

Among youth who had made a formal complaint while in custody, many felt it was not taken seriously. They said that complaints about staff who had been at that centre for a long time were usually ignored.

Suggestions from Youth

- ✦ Ensure all youth entering custody are given an orientation, even if they have been in the centre before.
- ✦ Post a list of rights in every resident's room.
- ✦ Add information about respecting staff and getting along with other residents to the orientation material.
- ✦ Allow youth to earn the right to wear their personal clothing.
- ✦ Tell youth why they are being punished when this occurs.

Safety

Supporting the *Time Out III* report findings, some youth said that they felt safe in all parts of the centre. Others felt that the safest areas were where other youth were not around, such as in their rooms with the door locked or in visits.

All youth said bullying and violence occurred in the centres, and many had been involved in bullying and violence either as a victim, a perpetrator or both.

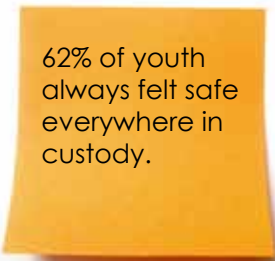
Youth felt that bullying was a part of the culture in custody and that it happened to everyone to a certain extent. Youth who were new to the centre or to a unit tended to be targets for bullying, as did young people with physical, mental or behavioural challenges.

Youth in Burnaby noted that because all units were mixing together in the same area during school, fights tended to occur more frequently in that area of the centre.


Female residents felt that bullying and fighting was a particular problem with females in custody and there was little that could be done to prevent it, as there was often no reason behind it. Fights between females often happened when staff were not paying attention to who entered certain rooms, particularly the shower rooms or the washrooms.

Females felt that the only way to stop bullying was for staff to move the bullied resident to another unit. Because there are only two units for females this was not always possible, and a victim and bully were often alternately locked in their rooms for an hour at a time while the other person did programming.

A few females said they did not always feel safe in the main rotunda of the school in Burnaby because males were in the same area. Most interactions with male residents in Burnaby happened by talking through windows or the fences in the courtyards, or when male and female residents wound up in the same room due to a mistake in the control room. However these interactions were rare, brief, and usually quickly stopped by a staff member.



62% of youth always felt safe everywhere in custody.



93% felt safe often or always in their rooms.

46% of youth felt that staff rarely or never knew when a resident was being bullied.

Staff response to bullying

Young people discussed how some staff would watch closely for bullying between residents, whereas others would not see it. Some felt that staff would only intervene in bullying when it became extreme or violent.

Some youth said that staff would sometimes victimize youth, including “joining in” on bullying youth who were being bullied by other residents. A few residents felt that some staff had contributed to the bullying by discussing residents’ personal histories where other residents could hear, and by moving vulnerable residents into units where bullying was likely to occur.

Many youth said that it was difficult to address issues of bullying while in custody because residents would be labelled a ‘rat’ if they talked to any staff or other adults. Being labelled a ‘rat’ carried considerable stigma among the residents and once a youth received this label, they would often be further bullied. As a result, some young people said that if they felt unsafe they would talk to another resident or keep it to themselves.

Suggestions from youth

The majority of youth were unable to provide any suggestions for how to address bullying in custody centres. However, some ideas were put forward:

- ✦ Although mediation can be helpful, it should not be forced on youth if they are not ready to enter the process.
- ✦ Allow the units to mix more as this might help address bullying by reducing the time youth spend with their peers on their unit.
- ✦ Move the youth who is being targeted onto a different unit, whenever possible.
- ✦ Have separate units for younger and older youth to prevent older youth from bullying younger ones.
- ✦ Open more female units so that youth who are being bullied can be moved.
- ✦ Have a separate unit for youth with more complex health conditions or disabilities so they can get more support and not be bullied.

Relationships

Relationships with custody staff

Experiences with staff in the centres were varied. Some youth liked staff who were friendly, open and made an effort to form a relationship with them. Others preferred that staff be minimally involved with residents and only enforce the rules of the centre. Most said that there were at least some staff they liked at the centre. Some said they liked almost all the staff and had respectful relationships with those they did not like.

Many felt that getting along with staff was a reciprocal process: staff were respectful of residents when residents were respectful of staff. Several of the youth commented that it was important to be respectful of staff and they were appreciative that staff came and worked with them every day.

Most youth said that the longer they were at the centre the better their relationships with staff became. Some had not been respectful to staff when they first entered custody, but over time had developed good relationships. Others felt that it was hard to repair a relationship that had started badly because, for example, they had been disrespectful to staff while going through drug withdrawal at the time they entered custody.

Some youth felt that new staff were stricter and harder to get along with. Whereas others felt the opposite and thought some staff who had worked at the centre a long time were less compassionate. A few felt that staff who had worked previously in adult prisons were the most difficult to get along with.

Youth felt that the most effective staff were those who used their judgement about when to enforce certain rules, treated youth fairly, did not appear to have favorites, had a sense of humor, gave them personal space when they were upset, and respected their boundaries.

Many youth spoke at length about room searches and the way it affected their relationships with staff. They found it upsetting that during these searches staff would pull their rooms apart and leave all of their belongings on the floor for the resident to clean up. This frustrated youth who kept their rooms clean and organized. Others were upset because of how their personal belongings were handled, such as throwing their family photos onto the floor during a search.



38% of youth felt that all or most staff treated residents fairly and with respect.

“You give respect you get respect back.”

“I wasn’t the most respectful when I first came in but now I have a great relationship with most of the staff.”

“Let staff workout and play sports and do programs with us.”

No youth said they had experienced physical mistreatment by staff while in custody. However, some said that they had experienced or witnessed verbal mistreatment such as staff making hurtful or abusive comments to or about a resident, including about health conditions the resident had. A common cause of conflict between staff and residents was staff talking about residents and their families in front of them or their peers.

While females said they mostly interacted with female staff, male staff members were called in to physically restrain females. Some felt this was inappropriate because male staff did not always realize that the female residents were not as strong as the males and would use too much force. Some females said having a male staff member physically restrain them was upsetting and would trigger them to fight back, whereas they found when female staff restrained them, they became calm more quickly.

Differences between centres

Youth in Prince George discussed how they had recently begun having their meals “family style,” with unit staff, from communal dishes rather than trays. Some youth said that although at first they had found the experience awkward, they now enjoyed the arrangement. Other youth commented that they felt comfortable eating with some staff but not others.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Have consistency across staff in applying rules so it is clear to residents what the rules are.
- ✦ Change room search procedure so that residents’ belongings are not thrown on the floor.
- ✦ Implement training for staff around being allies for young people, and building healthy relationships with youth.
- ✦ Have male staff members restrain female residents only in emergency situations when female staff are not available.
- ✦ Ensure that male staff who do restrain female residents use appropriate force.

Maintaining contact with family and friends

Young people had a lot of positive things to say about maintaining contact with their immediate families, and felt that custody staff supported them to talk with family as often as they wanted.

“They are really good for out of town visits, that is something they are doing really well.”

Barriers to having regular contact included their family not sending them letters because they could not afford the postage; not visiting because they lived too far away; having jobs they could not take time off from; or having small children they could not arrange care for. Some youth had not maintained contact with their family because they were embarrassed about being in custody.

Some youth wished to have members of their extended family visit or call, such as cousins, nieces and nephews or members of their family who were younger than 19. They felt that the centres did not understand how important their extended family relationships were to them. Youth felt it was not consistent who could be on their call list, as some youth had extended members of their family on their list and others did not.

“Your peers play a big part in your actions.”

Many youth also discussed how they wished they could stay in contact with friends and other people from their communities because they worried about being forgotten while they were in custody. They feared becoming further institutionalized or more likely to engage in criminal behaviour because they came to rely on youth in custody as their main social network. They worried about not meeting any new pro-social friends or maintaining contact with old ones who would support them to stay out of custody.



87% of youth had contact with family and friends through letters, phone calls or in-person visits while in custody.



“[Allow] monitored phone calls to girlfriends.”

Youth said it was difficult to maintain romantic relationships because they were not allowed to contact their partners. They felt anxiety that their partners might have moved on by the time they re-entered the community. However, some youth felt that custody had given them a break from a romantic partner who was in and out of custody or adult correctional facilities themselves. They acknowledged that maintaining that relationship would make it harder for them to stay out of custody.

Many youth wanted to be able to call their romantic partner because they felt that their boyfriend or girlfriend was a positive influence in their lives. Their partner discouraged them from engaging in criminal behaviours and encouraged them to make better choices, such as staying in school or following the rules of their probation. They also wished they could have visits from their partners’ parents who were often a second family to them.

Some of the young people talked about having children. They felt that it could sometimes be difficult to maintain contact with their children. This was especially true if they were not allowed to receive visits from the child’s other parent, and another family member had to bring the child to visit. A few youth also said that their child’s other parent or grandparents would not want the child to be in the environment of the custody centre, so they would not allow the child to visit.

Not many youth had used the video visits and many did not know this option was available. Some youth said they were not interested in using it because they thought that seeing their family but not being able to hug them would be upsetting. A few said they could not use the system because their family were not comfortable going to a probation office or custody centre to access it.

Among those who had used video visits, some said they enjoyed the experience and thought it was a good system, whereas others were uncomfortable using this approach and preferred phone calls.

Differences between centres

Youth in Prince George had limits on how many calls a day they could make and the length of the calls. These youth felt that this rule should be changed because many of their families were split between several different households and some youth wanted to speak to certain people in their family every day.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Allow romantic partners and extended family on call lists.
- ✦ Allow youth to contact friends from their community while in custody.
- ✦ Allow more contact with positive adults in youths' home communities, including social workers, AA/NA sponsors, and mentors.
- ✦ Offer a greater number and longer phone calls for all residents in all centres.

Youth who felt connected to their home community were more likely to think this would be their last time in custody.

“Kids go years without talking to friends.”

Relationships with probation officers

Most youth were excited to leave custody, but 31% were nervous about leaving, and 11% did not want to leave.

Youth who had 3 or more caring adults in their lives were less likely to feel extreme anxiety or stress in the past month.

“My P.O. is the best.”

Many youth talked about their positive relationships with their probation officers. They appreciated probation officers who were straight forward and honest, and who would make sure they understood their conditions of probation and what constituted a breach. They also appreciated probation officers who would try and have complicated or unreasonable conditions removed. One probation officer that youth spoke highly of would have extra conditions removed from youth’s probation orders but would breach them if they were even slightly late for curfew or missed any school. They liked that there were fewer conditions but knew that these would be strictly enforced.

“[My P.O. will] breach me if I’m 20 seconds late for curfew, but if I want to go to a different program or school, he gets it done.”

Youth also liked probation officers who were flexible and understanding, and would listen to their requests if they were reasonable. They also appreciated it when their probation officers took the time to get to know them. For example, a few youth said their probation officer would take them to lunch when they met or take them to do activities such as hiking.

“He’ll give you chances...he’s straight forward.”

Among youth who did not have a good relationship with their probation officers, a few acknowledged that they had previously behaved in an unacceptable way toward that officer. They were now trying to change their behaviour but felt their probation officer was holding the past against them. A few youth said that their probation officer was openly hostile toward them, would make fun of them and treated them as “less than a person.”

“My P.O. hates me... lots of hostility.”

Many youth spoke highly of Intensive Support and Supervision Program (ISSP) workers and thought they were helpful to youth returning to the community.

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Allow youth to change probation officers if they feel the relationship is no longer productive.
- ✦ Have more individualized probation orders that take into account the circumstances of each individual.
- ✦ Ensure youth fully understand the conditions of their probation and what constitutes a breach.
- ✦ Remove conditions of probation that make it difficult for youth to get to work or school, such as bans on transit.
- ✦ Provide alternatives to custody if youth voluntarily turn themselves in for a crime or a breach of probation, especially if their breach is small or accidental.
- ✦ Allow some youth to “check in” with their probation officer over the phone, especially if they do not live in the same city in which their probation office is located.
- ✦ Have ISSP workers available to youth who live in small or rural communities.

Involvement in decision making

Youth involved in program decisions reported more positive mental health.

“I guess [our ideas] get heard but not listened to.”

“[Some youth] don’t like it ‘cause they sit and watch other people decide their future for them.”

Youth who had been in government care felt their voices were not listened to by their community social workers. They felt that their social workers were not “on their side” and wished they would be more transparent and honest with youth about their care plan. They also wanted to have had more input into decisions affecting them, as this could have helped them to stay out of custody.

Youth and resident advisory

Youth reported that in custody they were given opportunities to express their ideas and bring complaints to staff during youth or resident advisory meetings. However, some felt their ideas were not listened to or taken seriously, or were not listened to as much as those of other youth. Several of the youth said they no longer participated in the meetings because no changes came as a result.

Release planning and reintegration leaves

Youth felt that whether or not they were invited to participate in their release planning depended on how long they had been in custody and how many previous sentences they had served.

Many youth felt they were just told where they would go when released and did not have any input. A few said they sometimes did not know when they were going to be released until the day before, or sometimes even the day of and that a hurried release plan was made at that time. Some youth said they had previously been released without knowing where they were going to live or how to access help.

“I wasn’t really involved... it’s kind of not up to you.”

Youth felt that there were services available to help residents leaving custody in their communities. However, many said they did not know where to go to access these. A few youth said that they knew where to access services but chose not to because they did not want to follow the rules.

Females thought that many of their peers had not participated in transition planning because the majority of female youth were sent to residential treatment after custody.

Many youth who were involved in their release planning found the process helpful. They felt that reintegration leaves were a useful tool for planning for their life after custody. During these leaves, youth who were sentenced to open custody could go into the community to apply for jobs, find housing, and set up school programs. However, some youth found reintegration leaves less helpful, particularly if they were not from the same community as the custody centre.

Differences Between Centres

Experiences of release planning were mixed in Burnaby and Victoria. In Prince George most youth said they had begun their release planning their first day in custody, and had input into their transition plan throughout their time in custody.

Youth who were involved in release planning were more likely to know where to find help once they left custody.

“They are not going to make you do things you don’t want to do.”

Suggestions from youth

- ✦ Encourage social workers to have more open communication with youth in care.
- ✦ Ensure residents have opportunities to share their opinions and be genuinely listened to.
- ✦ Make sure all youth are listened to equally.
- ✦ Start transition planning at least a month before youth are due to be released.
- ✦ Allow youth to be involved in the creation of their release plan.
- ✦ Ensure that setting up employment is a part of all residents’ transition plans, including creating a résumé, making plans for training in the community and setting up job interviews.
- ✦ Offer reintegration leaves more frequently, and make them accessible to youth in secure custody.
- ✦ Offer reintegration leaves for youth to go to the specific community where they will be released.

Key themes



The information and feedback youth provided in the workshops and through the claymation films was consistent with results from the Youth in Custody Survey. There were a number of common themes and priorities that emerged across the groups and across the centres.

Getting it right

- ✦ The non-judgmental and supportive drug and alcohol service which were easily accessed at the centers were praised by youth, with many of them acknowledging that it was substance misuse and addiction that had led them into custody.
- ✦ School in custody was a positive experience for most youth. It provided individualized support not available at school in the community.
- ✦ Many youth who had been suspended or expelled from school had plans to continue their education in the community, after having positive experiences of school in custody.
- ✦ The access to books and library services were greatly appreciated by youth.
- ✦ Youth were grateful for the programs run by volunteers and for programs which could help them to get a job, live independently and stay out of custody.
- ✦ Health services in custody were felt to be of good quality.
- ✦ Many youth appreciated the Aboriginal programming at Prince George and found it helpful.
- ✦ Many accessed sexual health services for the first time while in custody.
- ✦ Youth praised the way custody services supported them to maintain contact with immediate family.
- ✦ Youth were grateful for the positive relationships they had with important adults in their lives. For many, this included staff at the centres and probation officers.
- ✦ Using the results of the *Time Out III* survey to include youth's perspective in decisions made them feel valued.

Suggestions from youth

Improvements in the centres

- ✦ Build on current successful programs and provide more opportunities in custody for youth to create a better future for themselves, such as acquiring employment training and certificates, and learning concrete independent living skills.
- ✦ Offer access to unprocessed, fresh food while in custody with more protein and fresh vegetables.
- ✦ Address issues of confidentiality in the custody centre as these create barriers to accessing health care services, and harm relationships with staff.
- ✦ While youth were quick to take responsibility for their role in building positive relationships with staff, they felt it was also important for all staff to model respectful behaviours and create an environment that promoted respectful relationships.
- ✦ Youth had many people in their communities who were important to them, including individuals who were not related to them. Youth felt that maintaining these connections while in custody would help them successfully transition back into the community.
- ✦ The orientation provided by the custody centre's could be improved as it was not offered to all youth, and youth had difficulty remembering all the information.
- ✦ Youth recommended that more time be spent in the development of transition plans, and that youth have more input into what their plan would entail.

“Having our voices listened to.”

Improvements in the community

“Have a support group.”

- ✦ Youth in custody had encountered many barriers prior to entering custody, including poverty, substance use, interrupted school experiences, and a history of government care. Offering support to youth and their families in the community would help prevent youth entering custody.
- ✦ Access to affordable positive, fun activities in their communities would help youth stay out of custody.
- ✦ Many youth did not understand their probation conditions or were unable to follow them. This could be improved if probation officers were clear and direct with expectations, and took the time to ensure youth understood the conditions of their probation.
- ✦ Youth felt that more employment and job training services in the community would help young people to stay out of custody.

“We don't have the experience [to find a job].”

Final thoughts

Reflections on the Next Steps process

Youth seemed very interested and engaged in all aspects of the workshops and were genuinely interested in participating in a discussion. For the most part, groups worked well together and gave one another the space to discuss issues and propose different viewpoints. Generally, females in custody had similar experiences and opinions to the males. However, there were some issues which were unique to females, or were particularly challenging for them because of the small number in custody.

Youth openly discussed the significant barriers they face in the community including poverty, issues of substance abuse, challenges with the government care system and unstable family structures. They also spoke candidly about the challenges of being in custody such as victimization, violence, and issues with confidentiality. Despite these significant barriers, they had hopes for a better future and concrete ideas of how to improve the lives of young people facing these challenges.

Many youth chose to continue discussing issues that were important to them, about life in the community or in the custody centres, during break time. Participants reported they enjoyed the workshops and the opportunity to provide their feedback.

What happens next?

The young people who participated in the Next Steps workshops were eager to engage in dialogue, and knowledgeable of issues faced by young people who come into custody. They provided insightful suggestions on how organizations in the community, as well as Youth Custody Services, could help young people to cope with the significant challenges they face.

Youth have already shared their ideas with staff at the custody centres. At the end of each claymation filmmaking workshop, centre staff joined youth to watch a rough cut of their film and hear the reason they had chosen to focus on that topic. Youth and staff discussed the issues that were important to the youth and how the centre could better meet their needs.

Residents and staff were able to engage in a productive dialogue about the challenges faced by centres to meet budgets while still supporting the young people in the centres. Some ideas discussed included youth helping to create the centre's weekly programming schedule, having input into the new menu, and having more opportunities to provide suggestions and feedback.

There are plans to showcase the films at various custody service events and to continue to use them to facilitate dialogue among residents and staff.

