

# Special Handling Units

## Background

The Correctional Service of Canada introduced Special Handling Units (SHUs) in 1977. Inmates<sup>(1)</sup> who were considered dangerous and who jeopardized the safety of staff and other inmates were to be housed in the SHUs.

The decision to introduce SHUs was based on the recommendations of the 1975 Study Group on Dissociation. This study acknowledged that there were some inmates who could not be managed adequately in a maximum-security institution because of the high level of risk and danger they posed to staff and other inmates.

In 1977, a section of Millhaven Institution (Ontario region) was opened to serve as a SHU. As well, in 1978, the Correctional Development Centre (Quebec region) served as a SHU. In 1989, these units were replaced by two new institutions built specifically to serve as SHUs. The new units are located in Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and Ste-Anne-des-Plaines, Quebec.

With the introduction of the Correctional Service of Canada's Mission, the policies governing the SHUs were reviewed and, subsequently, their philosophy and objectives were revised. In 1990, a new policy on the management of dangerous inmates was implemented. This policy embodied the philosophy and objectives of the Mission and changed the SHUs to more program-oriented facilities. The policy provided for a new definition of "dangerous inmates" and emphasized that inmates were to be admitted to a SHU only when their needs could not be addressed in a less secure facility.

The overall objective of the SHUs is to motivate and assist inmates to change their behaviour. The goal is to reduce the risk they pose to an acceptable level and ensure that they are successfully reintegrated into a maximum-security institution as soon as possible. To achieve this objective, the new policy includes:

- the introduction of a 90-day assessment period for inmates under consideration for admission to a SHU;
- the integration of essential components in programming, including psychiatric intervention, employment opportunities and personal development opportunities;
- the promotion of staff-inmate interaction and fewer physical controls so that the correctional environment will be conducive to inmates changing their behaviour;
- the establishment of a National Review Committee which provides for a more objective decision-making process when considering inmates' admission to, and transfer from, the SHUs; and
- the requirement for an annual review of the SHUs and a report to comment on the progress of the SHUs and make recommendations for improvement.

## Assessment and Admission Process

When an inmate kills or causes serious harm to a staff member or another inmate, or it is determined that

he seriously jeopardizes the safety of others, that inmate may be transferred to a SHU for an assessment period. Various assessments are then conducted, including psychological and psychiatric evaluations and assessments of his educational level. As well, the inmate's correctional treatment plan is redeveloped.

After the assessments, the National Review Committee reviews the inmate's case history and determines whether correctional programming in the SHU is necessary. During 1991-92, 103 inmates were transferred to the SHUs for assessment. The majority were transferred as a result of their involvement in a major assault on another inmate, hostage takings or potential hostage takings.

Nationally, just over half of the inmates (51.5%) who were transferred to the SHU for assessment were actually admitted by the National Review Committee. Of those admitted, almost one quarter (22.6%) had previously been admitted to a SHU, and in 7.5% of these cases, it had been between 2 and 10 years since the inmate was last in the SHU.

### Profile of Inmates Admitted to the SHUs

In 1991-92, the inmate population in the SHUs ranged from 50 to 60 inmates in the Prairies SHU and 50 to 65 inmates in the Quebec SHU.

First-degree murder was the most common major offence of those admitted to the Prairies SHU (21.1%). In the Quebec SHU, the most common major offences for those admitted were second-degree murder and robbery (20.6% each).

The most common sentence of inmates admitted to the Prairies SHU and the Quebec SHU was a life sentence (42.1% in Prairies and 26.5% in Quebec).

Almost half of the inmates admitted to the Prairies SHU (47.5%) and about one third of those admitted to the Quebec SHU (32.4%) were serving their first federal term of incarceration. The highest number of previous federal terms for inmates admitted to the Prairies SHU was three. For inmates admitted to the Quebec SHU, the highest number of previous federal terms was six.

The average age of inmates admitted to the Prairies SHU was 31.5 years, with a range of 24 to 52 years. The average age of inmates admitted to the Quebec SHU was 32.8 years, with a range of 22 to 55 years.

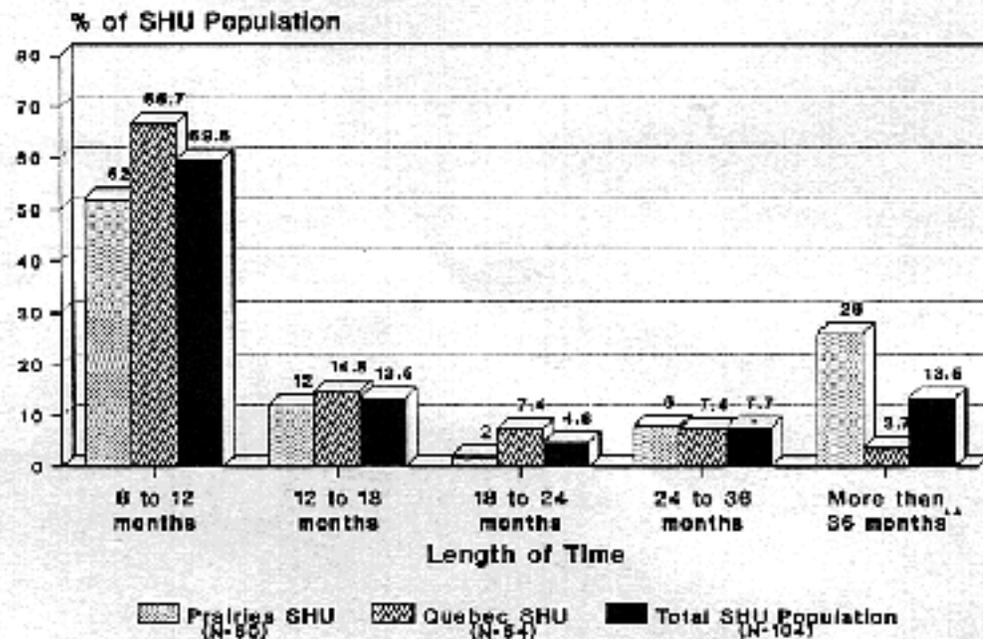
### Time Served in the SHUs (Consecutive)

The figure provides the distribution of inmates by length of time served in the SHUs. The distribution of inmates reflects the entire SHU population as of 31 March 1992. Admissions for 1991-92 fall into the 6-to- 12-month group.

As the figure shows, most inmates in the SHUs have been there for less than a year. There is one marked difference between the two SHUs in the length of time that inmates have spent there: one quarter of inmates in the Prairies SHU, compared with only 3.7% in the Quebec SHU, have been there for more than three years.

Figure 1

Length of Time Served in Special Handling Units (Consecutive)\*



\* Data for SHU populations as of 31 March 1992.  
 \*\* Ranges from 37 months to 71 years.

Programs, Education and Employment

The progress of all SHU inmates admitted for correctional programming is reviewed at least every four months by the Institutional Committee and subsequently by the National Review Committee. A decision is then made as to whether the inmate can be transferred to a maximum-security institution.

The amount of time that inmates spend in the SHU depends on whether their behaviour has improved prosocially and whether the objectives established in their correctional plan have been achieved. Both of these reflect the inmate's ability to reintegrate safely into a maximum-security institution. The majority of inmates achieve the objectives of their correctional plan and are transferred from the SHU in about one year or less.

Various programs are offered at each SHU, and inmates are encouraged to participate in programs, education or employment, in keeping with their specific needs. During 1991-92, substance-abuse and education programs at both SHUs had a high number of participants. Employment positions at the Prairies SHU doubled - from 18 to 36-since last year. At the Quebec SHU, 25 employment positions were available. As well, psychiatric services for inmates were improved in both SHUs since last year.

Staff-Inmate Interaction

The SHUs are committed to promoting staff-inmate interaction as the Correctional Service of Canada views meaningful contact between staff and inmates as a key to encouraging and assisting inmates to change their behaviour. Prior to the implementation of the new policy, the SHUs maintained a strictly controlled physical environment. With the new policy, restrictions were reviewed and reduced wherever possible.

In keeping with this philosophy, both SHUs adopted "no-cuff" and "open interview" approaches with as many inmates as possible. No-cuff status means that an inmate does not require handcuffs when moving outside his cell. The exception to this is when an inmate is in the hospital, given the presence of potentially dangerous instruments. In 1991-92, half of the maximum inmate population (49.6%) of both SHUs had no-cuff status.

Open interviews refer to face-to-face interviews between staff and inmates without a barrier, such as glass or screens. For both SHUs in 1991-92, 43.2% of the inmate population had open interview status.

### The Role of Special Handling Units

The SHUs provide a facility and an appropriate correctional environment wherein, by helping dangerous inmates deal with their own needs, we can safely reintegrate them into a maximum-security institution. This is the stated policy objective of the SHUs.

However, we also achieve other results. By removing inmates who have jeopardized the safety of staff and other inmates in our correctional institutions, we may reduce violence in these institutions. In doing so, order can be maintained in correctional institutions, and we can promote a correctional environment that is conducive to the achievement of personal and corporate objectives. That is, inmates cannot function, participate in programs and look after their own needs effectively if their safety is threatened by violent inmates. Similarly, staff cannot assist, or successfully intervene with, inmates under these conditions. The result is clear: safe reintegration into society is delayed.

In the broader context, then, the SHUs contribute to the achievement of the Correctional Service of Canada's objective to reduce significantly the number of violent incidents in institutions and to reintegrate safely a larger number of offenders into society as law-abiding citizens.

Given the relatively short period of time that has elapsed since the implementation of the new SHU policy, it may be somewhat premature to assess the long-term effectiveness and success of the SHUs. However, there are positive early indications of success, as evidenced by the relatively low readmission rate of inmates to the SHUs, increased staff-inmate interaction and improved treatment and programs.

To ensure that the SHUs are progressive in their approach to intervention with dangerous inmates, we must continually try to improve our understanding of these offenders and their needs, and continue research and improvement in the SHU process, especially in terms of staff-inmate interaction and programming.

(1)*Special Handling Units house only male inmates.*