

Secure detention and short-term custody youth centres: A social service perspective

Nearly a decade ago, the Young Offenders Act generated a major change in Canadian corrections - it resulted in many 16- and 17-year-old offenders being placed in secure detention or custody, separate and apart from the adult offender population.

Although the Young Offenders Act is federal legislation, it is administered provincially. Ontario is one of two provinces (the other is Nova Scotia) that has a split jurisdiction within this administration. The Ministry of Community and Social Services is responsible for youths between the ages of 12 and 15 (phase 1), and the Ministry of the Solicitor General and Correctional Services deals with 16- and 17-year-old offenders (phase 2).

This article presents an overview of the establishment of a secure detention and short-term custody unit within an adult correctional facility to shed some light on the care, supervision and treatment of "phase 2" young offenders. The article focuses on the procedures and services in the Ottawa-Carleton Young Offenders' Unit. How was the young offenders' unit set up? As of April 1 1985, "phase 2" young offenders in custodial settings were required by law to be housed separately from those 18 and older. Until that time, adult correctional facilities held both male and female offenders older than 16.

The Ottawa-Carleton Young Offenders' Unit was set up (on the second floor) within the existing structure of the maximum-security Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre.

The unit was built during a two-week period. It was first set up as a 24-bed unit divided into two dormitories (one for 20 males and one for four females), but disruptive behaviour among the young offenders, particularly at night, necessitated a more secure separation.

Adult female inmates were, therefore, moved to the dormitories and the male young offenders took over the former adult female 12-cell area, with each cell double bunked. Although the move was incident-driven, the young offenders gained some benefits including more privacy and access to a large day room.

However, their energetic and impulsive ways soon caused further problems. Food fights often erupted during meals, and chairs and tables were tossed around. As a result, large metal "dinner" tables were bolted to the floor. After cell furnishings were destroyed, metal bunk beds, toilets, desks and chairs were also secured.

The young offenders' exercise yard consisted of a caged-in area on the roof of the building. Visits took place behind a plexiglass window using telephone communication. Staffing the unit In April 1985, correctional officers on the adult side of the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre with the necessary training to work with adolescents assumed the duties of youth officers. Several operational managers were also assigned to the unit. A records clerk/secretary was hired to handle the paperwork, and a social worker was recruited to provide social work services.

Health care, psychological and chaplaincy services were originally provided through resources already at the detention centre. A psychologist, a recreational officer, a chaplain and two teachers were later added

to the unit.

In adult correctional facilities, there is often a clear separation between security and programming staff. This is not the case in young offenders' units. All staff play an integral role in the care, supervision and treatment of each young offender. Accommodating young offenders Over the years, the Ottawa-Carleton Young Offenders' Unit has been transformed into a secure and structured setting. It is now a very well-known and well-used facility for young offenders in Ontario's Eastern Region.

Although the unit has a 24-bed capacity, the number of young offenders "in residence" often exceeds that number. There is a high turnover, with an average length of stay being approximately one month. Most of the unit's young offenders are awaiting a bail, trial, sentencing, transfer or review hearing.

Upon sentencing, residents receiving a long-term sentence (three months to three years) are transferred to a secure-custody setting. In the Eastern Region, the long-term secure-custody facility is the Brookside Youth Centre in Cobourg.

Unlike the adult system, where offenders are assessed and classified according to security and programming needs, and then placed in a minimum-, medium- or maximum-security centre, young offenders are routinely transferred from the Ottawa-Carleton Young Offenders' Unit to the Brookside Youth Centre shortly after they receive a long-term sentence.

Another feature of the unit that differs from adult corrections is the internal security classification system. Upon admission to the Ottawa-Carleton Detention Centre, adult female offenders are placed in the female offender unit, while adult male offenders are placed in minimum-security dormitories (if they are non-violent), maximum-security cells (if they are violent and problematic) or protective custody (if they are sexual offenders, informants or simply unable to cope with general population inmates).

In the young offenders' unit, all offenders (regardless of gender or admission status) are housed together. They eat together, participate in programs together and spend idle time in the same day room. Female sleeping quarters, however, are far removed from the male quarters. Each unit has a high ratio of specialized staff to residents. Staff develop supervision and intervention strategies to deal with "offender blending" problems as they arise.

An internal classification system (each offender is assessed by security and clinical staff) is also used to prevent victimization in the unit. Young offenders likely to prey on others share accommodations with similar offenders, to minimize the chances of housing potential victims with "predators."

A reward system also encourages the young offenders to perform 16 prosocial behaviours each day. Youth officers tally the offenders' weekly point totals and, depending on their total, the offenders are placed in one of three "levels." Young offenders at the highest level receive the most privileges (such as contact visits with parents or late day-room time). On the other hand, misconduct punishments can result in level downgrading, cell confinement (for a specified time period, not to exceed three days) or extra clean-up duty. Offender-management procedures Upon admission to the unit, the offender undergoes an intake needs assessment and a psychological evaluation. Each young offender's criminal history (such as

circumstances of present and past offences), attitudes, family background, peer associations, education, employment, substance abuse, emotional and physical health, and unit adjustment (such as problems with peers and staff) is evaluated systematically.

Once program needs are identified, offenders are referred to appropriate service providers (such as the school program for academic upgrading). A "plan of care" is developed for each young offender, detailing the duration and intensity of their required services. This coordinates services and ensures that staff are not working at cross purposes.

Offender case reviews are held regularly to discuss escorted passes (for recreational or community outings) and to discuss passes for regular home visits. This process usually considers:

- outstanding charges (if any);
- prior record of escapes (if any);
- type of offence(s);
- family support (ability to control and supervise);
- the results of a meeting with parents (before release);
- feedback from the supervising probation officer; and
- overall unit behaviour.

Service provision Within the unit, a multi-disciplinary team (consisting of a social worker, a psychologist, a chaplain, two teachers, a recreational officer, a unit manager, two operational managers and 12 youth officers) provides services to the young offenders.

The unit social worker prepares youth court reports for sentence reviews and transfer hearings. Other duties include chairing weekly case review meetings and completing discharge summaries - to another secure custody facility, open custody or the community (probation).

Aside from this administrative role, the social worker also provides individual and group counselling, covering such areas as anger management, social and interpersonal skills, family counselling, job preparation, and discharge planning.

Clinical services are also provided by a chaplain who delivers spiritual, substance abuse and family counselling, and by a psychologist who specializes in the areas of sexual abuse, psychotic disorders, suicidal ideation and depression. Academic upgrading is offered through correspondence courses, (with the assistance of two teachers) and leisure activities are coordinated by a recreational officer. What is the outlook? Adolescence is a confusing time of growth and change. Without the necessary care, support, training and counselling, it would be unrealistic to expect troubled youths to acquire the maturity, insight and skills required to become productive members of society.

After a decade of experience with 16-and 17-year-old young offenders, the Young Offenders' Unit has shown that, given the help to meet their needs, many young offenders can resume a normal and prosocial life.

That is the advantage of dealing with young offenders in a unit apart from their adult counterparts. The ratio of staff to offenders is often significantly higher than in adult institutions (adolescents are viewed as more responsive to treatment than adults), and the multidisciplinary team approach and philosophy make the environment much more favourable to rehabilitation. Security and program staff work together toward each young offender's goals.

We have a social and moral obligation to make a concerted effort to provide young offenders with the opportunities and support systems to change their lives. Young offender facilities are one important step along this path.

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