



News Release

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Repurpose youth justice resources to better support young people, Rep says

VICTORIA – A dramatic drop in the number of youth committing crimes and being sentenced to custody over the last 20 years has resulted in a gross under-utilization of scarce resources at the Ministry of Children and Family Development (MCFD), according to a new report released today by Representative for Children and Youth (RCY) Dr. Jennifer Charlesworth.

The report, entitled *Missed Opportunities: A review of the use of youth justice resources*, highlights the sharp contrast between this situation and the urgent under-resourcing of other MCFD service streams, and calls on government to reallocate resources to better serve the current needs of British Columbia's children and youth.

“The massive decrease in the number of youth involved with the youth justice system – and particularly the low number of youth who are in custody on any given day – is something to be celebrated,” Charlesworth said. “The average daily population of 15 youth in custody is less than one-fifth of what it was a decade ago. The downside of this, however, is that government has not yet repurposed the surplus resources that are no longer needed, resulting in what can only be characterized as a squandering of taxpayer dollars, leaving too many young people with other needs completely under-served. This has to change.”

The report data show that the 2022/23 average community caseload of 808 was less than half of what it was 10 years earlier and less than a quarter of what it was 20 years earlier. In addition, the youth justice system – like the child protection system – disproportionately affects Indigenous youth. In 2022/23, 53 per cent of the youth in custody and 41 per cent of those under community youth justice supervision in B.C. were Indigenous. At the Prince George youth custody facility – the closure of which the ministry has recently announced after receiving an advance copy of this report – the proportion was even greater, at 82 per cent.

Given this, the Representative believes that these proportions should be used as guidelines for the re-allocation of youth justice resources to services for Indigenous youth and communities, preferably delivered by Indigenous agencies. For example, as a matter of principle, with the planned closure of the Prince George facility, 82 per cent of the redeployed resources should be dedicated to services for Indigenous youth, including Indigenous girls, preferably administered by or in partnership with Indigenous agencies. This should be done in consultation with the First Nations Justice Council, local First Nations and the Métis Nation BC.

Another vital consideration is the need to mitigate the negative impacts of the closure of the Prince George facility on youth and their families given that, if ordered to custody, youth from the northern areas of the province would have to be placed far away from their communities.

A means of mitigating impacts could be to enhance services so that the need to resort to custody for youth from Northern areas is avoided in the first place. For example, a reallocated fund could be available to purchase intensive, individually tailored community services for youth from the Northern areas who otherwise would likely be committed to custody, and thereby keep them within or near their home communities and avoid the negative impacts of incarceration.

The planned closure of the Prince George facility is only a beginning step. For example, even with the closure of that facility, the one remaining custody centre in Burnaby, with a staffed operational capacity of 84, will only be about 25 per cent occupied, while community youth justice and Youth Forensic Psychiatric Services will continue to be significantly under-utilized. Although the RCY report does not prescribe specific solutions, it does suggest possible directions for solutions, such as leaving Youth Forensic Psychiatric Services in place but expanding the range of young people served.

The Representative makes a single recommendation: that MCFD, in consultation with youth, the First Nations and Métis Justice Councils and with ministry partners, carefully review the under-utilization of youth justice services and implement a plan for the redeployment of resources so that the needs of young people are better served. The plan should include a full reallocation of all savings to new services, including allocation to services for Indigenous young people that are delivered by or in partnership with Indigenous peoples in the same proportion as the representation of Indigenous youth in youth justice services.

“We have outlined in detail areas of urgent need for children and youth in previous reports to government – as examples in *Still Left Out* and *A Parent’s Responsibility*, released last year, that detail the desperate need for investment in children and youth with disabilities and mental health conditions,” Charlesworth said. “Government has a golden opportunity here to redeploy its limited resources so that the needs of young people and families in the here-and-now are being served.”

The full report is available here: <https://rcybc.ca/?p=8049>

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