Reimagining youth justice in Ontario

How we transformed a custody-focused system into a spectrum of services that meet diverse youth needs

Provided to the North American Council for Juvenile Justice
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Over the past decade, youth justice has changed in Ontario. Youth crime has declined, police are charging fewer youth and courts are ordering significantly fewer youth custody sentences. More youth in, or at risk of, conflict with the law are diverted from formal court proceedings or receive specialized services in their communities to help them become more productive adults.

There is a lot at stake in how we respond to youth crime – for youth, families and communities. Responses that neither hold youth accountable nor address underlying causes of offending behaviour can put youth at risk of recidivism, limiting their opportunities for social and economic participation. Ineffective responses during a youth’s early contact with the justice system can lead to more intrusive and costly criminal justice interventions later. Failure to rehabilitate youth can place burdens on public services and undermine community safety.

With such high stakes, Ontario has shifted from a custody-focused system to a continuum of services that meet diverse youth needs.
Who we serve
How we’ve changed the system
Key trends
Moving forward
Youth in conflict with the law have diverse needs

- 68% identified with a mental health need*
- 33% were not enrolled in school**
- 19% were Crown / Society wards***
- 39% of female youth
- 33% of male youth
- 33% identified as chronic drug users*

**SOURCES**
* Ministry of Children and Youth Services, May 2013 | Probation Officer Survey
** Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2012 | Probation Officer Survey
*** Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013 | Snapshot of admissions January–December 2013
Aboriginal youth are overrepresented in Ontario’s justice system

9.6% of Ontario’s youth justice admissions

3.4% of Ontario’s youth population

Northern Ontario is home to 36% of the province’s Aboriginal youth but 66% of our Aboriginal youth justice admissions

SOURCE Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013/14 | Statistics Canada, 2011; youth aged 0-19 years | Self-identification by youth
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Over the past decade, Ontario’s youth justice system has changed

Then
custody-focused system

Now
spectrum of services that meet diverse needs

**Then**
- Probation
- Custody and detention

**Now**
- Prevention
- Diversion
- Other community programs
- Reintegration / rehabilitation
- Probation
- Custody and detention
Two years, three turning points for youth justice in Ontario

2003

Youth Criminal Justice Act redefines Canadian youth justice policy

- Requires youth system separate from adults
- Highlights prevention, diversion, rehabilitation, reintegration, and alternatives to custody
- Supports responses to special needs of youth

2004

Ontario creates Ministry of Children and Youth Services

- Recognizes and addresses specific needs of children and youth
- Aims to help young people succeed and reach full potential

Youth justice services become part of new ministry

- Creates dedicated system for youth aged 12-17 at the time of an offence
- Integrates youth justice within the broader children and youth sector

NOTE: Youth Criminal Justice Act replaced the Young Offenders Act
A decade of putting legislation into practice

2004

Research on effective programming to reduce re-offending and address special needs and risks of youth

28.7 million re-invested in front end community alternatives by reducing custody capacity

More partnerships with community agencies and across ministries
Now, most services are community-based

400+ community-based programs

60 custody / detention facilities

Prevention  Diversion  Probation  Other community programs  Reintegration / Rehabilitation

SOURCE Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2014/15 | Community-based programs: all services except custody and detention
Almost 9 out of 10 youth receive services in the community

30,823 total youth justice admissions in 2014/15

26,977 youth in community-based programs

3,846 youth in custody and detention

SOURCE Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2014/15 | Community-based programs: all services except custody and detention
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Youth crime has declined in Ontario

46% decline in youth crime

SOURCE Canadian Centre for Justice Statistics, 2003-2014 | Excludes traffic and federal offences
Police are charging fewer youth

2003
- 29,848 charged
- 29,379 diverted

of 59,227 youth accused

2014
- 13,582 charged
- 16,433 diverted

of 30,015 youth accused

The number of youth charged decreased by 54%
Fewer youth are in custody and detention

- **Custody admissions**
  - 2003-04: 5,640
  - 2014-15: 3,373
  - **81% decline**

- **Detention admissions**
  - 2003-04: 2,452
  - 2014-15: 473
  - **40% decline**

Who we serve

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Key trends

Moving forward
Moving forward, building on our success

- Evidence-informed continuous improvement
- Research on early risk factors for future contact with the law
- Closer cross-sector collaboration to serve youth with multiple needs
- Broader system level approach to prevention and diversion
- Lower cost options to prevent life long contact with the law
Strengthening our response to diverse youth needs

Ontario invests in *Aboriginal*-specific youth justice services

$4.8 million per year

45 community-based programs

46 of Ontario’s 54 court sites have youth mental health court workers

Facilitate diversion and link youth with community-based mental health services

SOURCE Ministry of Children and Youth Services, 2013/14
Rethinking how we measure impact to improve outcomes for youth

Shifting to a broader range of evidence-informed, needs-based services has required moving beyond recidivism as the key measure of impact.

Ontario has developed a new framework to collect and share data that better measures our impact and supports continuous improvement.

The Youth Justice Outcomes Framework focuses on four key outcomes:

- Improved Functioning & Positive Social Behaviours
- Increased Skills & Abilities
- Increased Youth Engagement with Supports
- Decreased Re-Offending

New tools, like voluntary experience surveys, help give youth and their families a voice in the services that affect them.
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